

...Providing second language learners with an opportunity to act as inquirers in the creation of a knowledge base about literacy learning can influence them to become critical thinkers about their own reading development.

## Plática as Critical Instruction: Talking with Bilingual Students About Their Reading

Leila Flores-Dueñas

*"Vamos a platicar"... Plática to most Spanish-speakers is talk, but not just any talk, it's talk about sharing inner truths, life's challenges and achievements, and more importantly, to "catch-up" with someone you deeply care about. This special type of talk is common among close friends and family members of Latina(os) communities. Throughout my teaching experiences, and life in general, I have utilized this discursive form of interaction to gain more personal meaning from conversations with those I share my life with.*

Throughout the time that I taught in elementary schools, I observed how countless bilingual learners were exited from language programs into all-English speaking classrooms as early as the 2nd grade. Once these students were exited or "transitioned" into the regular classroom, I noticed that they received little (if any) language support or cultural understanding to help them "connect" with what they were reading or what was being communicated in the classroom, with their prior experience. What would become of these students? What became of my own students? Did they eventually contribute to the number of Hispanics that made up the 60-65% dropout rate in our *barrio's* middle school where they would be going? The names and faces of the many *Mexicano* children I worked with as an elementary teacher often fade in and out of my mind, "Rosana, José, Laura, Andrés, Marta, Violeta" leaving me with wondering about whether they "made it" or not. With these students in mind, I have focused the current study on the personal stories or narratives that Mexican American bilingual learners can contribute to our understanding about their experiences with reading in English. It is my hope that by listening to their voices, educators can learn how to better serve these children.

### Listening to Student Voices

One way to improve school policies and practices that can affect the educational experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students is by listening to student voices (Nieto, 1994). It is within the qualitative paradigm that we, as researchers and as educators, can underscore the significance of providing a space for the voice of individuals who would otherwise be ignored or whose social condition could be seriously misunderstood (McElroy-Johnson, 1993).

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**Leila Flores-Dueñas is an Assistant Professor of Language, Literacy & Sociocultural Studies at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque.**

Rather than continuing with the common practice of viewing students as the "beneficiaries of change," educators can learn from students when they become actors or "participants" in the change process of structural reform or instructional practice (Fullan, 1991, p. 170). To listen to these voices, however, researchers must see value in what these students can communicate about their experiences.

If we, as educators, can detach ourselves from the limited way that we have been taught to see our children (often as objects to be seen and not heard), and if we can begin to allow students to go beyond *safe* school talk, we can, perhaps, begin to provide opportunities for students to construct and/or reconstruct the way they see themselves as learners. Seeking such opportunities can also provide an avenue for using language and self-expression as a means of building on the literacy realities of our many culturally and linguistically diverse students. Drawing on the interplay between language, self-expression, and the construction of reality, Skutnabb-Kangas (1981) eloquently states:

Language derives its importance precisely from the fact that it is both learned and used in association with other people. There is a dialectic relationship between language and reality (both internal and external reality): each influences the other. Language plays an important part in shaping reality, since it provides us with categories for conceptualizing it. But reality in its turn also molds language, so that it corresponds to the need to express what people want to express. Language is in itself a world mediating between the individual and external circumstances (p.2).

Having the opportunity to actively construct how they experience language and literacy learning, culturally and linguistically diverse students can, not only, inform instructional practice, but they can also personally benefit from their own insight about themselves and their literacy development (SooHoo, 1993). The current research study assumed that the participants' voices were primary (in terms of explaining their experiences) and that their narratives about their lives were valid. It also assumed that the participants' contributions could help to extend a knowledge base that is concerned with helping language minority students in reading development. In order to inform future practice in the area of reading and to break down the image of students as merely beneficiaries of educational change, I worked to listen to and highlight what these students had to say about their personal experiences with reading texts in English.

In this study, I use the term "voice" as a theoretical construct to account for the students' contributions to this research endeavor. Drawing on McElroy-Johnson's (1993) ideas about the topic, I use the notion of *voice* as...

...a strong sense of identity within the individual, an ability to express personal point of view, and a sense of personal well being that allows a student to respond to and become engaged with the material being studied... Voice, in this sense is having a place within the academic setting... Voice is identity, a sense of self, a sense of relationship to others, and a sense of purpose. Voice is power- power to express ideas and convictions, power to direct and shape an individual life towards a productive and positive fulfillment for self, family, community, nation, and the world. (p. 85-86).

### **Plática in Small Literature Group Discussions**

One way to provide students with a space for talking about their literacy learning is by holding small literature group discussions that allow for *plática* or honest talk to take place. Accomplishing this kind of talk is not easy for it goes beyond Spiegel's (1996) child-centered classroom community, where the teacher plays the role of facilitator to ensure that the group's members can build on each other's interpretations of the text. *Plática* also goes beyond Eeds and Wells (1989) view of the teacher that acts as a collaborating participant who is responsible for finding *teachable moments*. A collaborator who must also establish an open atmosphere that encourages all students to participate in the discussion. While I agree that these strategies are helpful to all students, I would argue that they do little for those students who come to each small literature group discussion with three perceived strikes against them. For second language learners of color, these strikes are notable: (1) their cultural and linguistic heritage is rarely valued in the books they read, (2) they do not have the middle-class European American world view that is required to answer questions after a typical story *correctly*, and (3) they often experience gaps in their learning due to lack of access to cultural knowledge or vocabulary. What I am suggesting here is that working with Mexican American bilingual students, requires much more from teachers than the mere formation of small groups. Rather, it obligates teachers to deconstruct the various deficits that society lays upon these children. In other words, discussions must be extended to include *plática* about issues of power, culture, and language as they surface in literature reading.

### **Trust and Small Literature Group Discussions with Bilingual Students**

In teacher-led, small-group discussions with Mexican American second language learners, the role of the teacher or facilitator must be carefully considered. Critical to the success of these reader response groups is trust: "teacher trust of student, student trust of teacher, student trust of students, and student trust of self" (Spiegel, 1996, p.333). While Spiegel uses the idea of trust as a focus of planning for small literature group discussions, I take this idea one step further by applying the notion of trust in small-group literature discussions to working with culturally and linguistically diverse students. While I have found Spiegel's (1996) work on trust in reader response groups to be helpful in providing information about how to go about planning for such literature groups (i.e. whether to practice or not, use prompts or not, use authentic teacher questions, choices in literature selection, and topics for discussion), the idea of trust can be extended to include the importance of social, cultural, and linguistic knowledge on the part of the teacher about her or his second language learners. Within this idea of trust in response to literature and literacy learning groups is an understanding of power (Alton-Lee, Nuthall, & Patrick, 1993), which can affect the roles that individuals take on in these groups. Also important to the idea of trust is an understanding of the importance of tapping *students' funds of knowledge* (Moll, 1992).

Understanding trust and power relationships is important since the classroom is often not a neutral ground for all students. In other words, some students have more power in classroom interactions than others. Alton-Lee et al., (1993) explain that this difference in power can be seen as a reflection of the interactions that take place

between people or groups in our larger society. Therefore, it follows that some students, like language minority students, have less power than others in the classroom (i.e. fluent English speakers from the dominant cultural group) and are less likely to participate in discussions about literature. Learning environments are possible wherein language minority students trust that the power they hold is not questioned, as in the book club discussions described in the Goatley, Brock, Raphael study (1994) of diverse students. Where such environments are nurtured, culturally and linguistically diverse children like Mei (a Vietnamese immigrant student in Goatley's study) are empowered to take on the role of leader, even though they often may not in regular classroom discussions.

As mentioned, Mei is a case in point of how small-group literature discussions can encourage language minority students to participate in discourse about texts. However, this is not always the case for the many second language learners who may be reluctant to participate in literature discussions or who rarely have the opportunities to participate in small literature group discussions. This may have to do with linguistic or cultural limitations, or it may have to do with lack of trust (with peers, teacher, and/or trust of self) about of how to communicate concerning literature. This lack of participation could be tied to classroom dynamics or to the students' perceptions of what is acceptable discourse in school discussions. For example, if the teacher and/or students do not value the child's experiences or *funds of knowledge* (bodies of knowledge that are directly tied to their family lives), then it is likely that the student will not share her/his personal experiences when talking about texts (Moll, 1994). The current study focused on the role that *plática* (talk) played in small group discussions with bilingual students as they talked about their literacy learning in all-English classrooms.

### **Origin of the Study**

This research project was part of a larger study that examined how Mexicano second language learners responded to reading various kinds of literature (Flores-Dueñas, 1997). For the purposes of this analysis, I will focus on the following general research question:

What can be learned through *plática* with bilingual students about their reading experiences in all-English classrooms?

### **Methods**

I utilized qualitative research methods (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) to collect the data for this study. The 5th-grade students who participated in the study, attended a low socio-economic school in a large Texas city that was composed of 85% Mexican American students. This study took place over a nineteen week period and was part of a larger study that examined bilingual students' responses to Mexican American literature and their classroom curriculum (Flores-Dueñas, 1997). The data collected during this study included the use of participant observations (Becker & Geer, 1972; Patton, 1990), focus group interviews (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956), reading think-alouds (Ericsson & Simon, 1980; Olson, Duffy, & Mack, 1984), and in-depth interviews with the students' parents and teachers.

The primary sources of data consisted of eight audiotaped and transcribed focus group interviews. During each of these sessions, the students: (1) read one carefully selected story that was written by either a Mexican American or non-Mexican American author; (2) retold the story in writing; and (3) participated in an in-depth focus

group interview about the events and characteristics of the text, their understanding of the story, and their reading processes as they read the texts. The transcriptions of these sessions were analyzed to identify salient themes that emerged across the discussions and retellings.

Four students, 'Sonia, Alfredo, Rosalinda, and José' (the students' and the teacher's names are pseudonyms) were selected to participate in the study. Two of the students attended 'Mrs. Gallagher's' classroom, and the other two children attended 'Mrs. Villanueva's' classroom. These students were exited out of bilingual programs because they had passed the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) in the 3rd or 4th-grade and because they were approved by the Language Proficiency Acquisition Committee (LPAC) to exit bilingual programs and to begin completing all academic work in English. The LPAC is a special committee made up of the student's teachers, parents, and counselors, who come together to make recommendations about the student's language proficiency and placement in bilingual, ESL, and all-English classroom settings.

In reviewing each students' informal interviews, I was able to find some salient themes which helped me to form a somewhat homogeneous focus group of students. The pre-selection interviews with the four students revealed the following common sentiments toward reading English which indicate homogeneity:

- The students explained that they liked to read; however, they did not read for enjoyment.
- They did not have many books or reading materials in their homes.
- They were not *read to* as young children.
- They intimated that they did not consider themselves to be good readers.
- They expressed interest in learning more about their reading development.
- They confirmed the desire to become better readers in English.

### Findings

In analyzing the data collected with the four children, several themes emerged that help to explain the role that *plática* might play in small group discussions about these students' literacy learning. In the following section, I will focus on two main themes that resulted from the analysis: 1) mirroring classroom practices; and 2) deconstructing and reconstructing literacy learning.

### Mirroring Classroom Practices

During nearly all of the small group meetings about their reading development, the students revealed that their thoughts about reading were intimately tied to the ways that their classes were conducted. For example, in the following discussion, the students attempted to explain to me their thoughts on what they felt was reading. It is evident in this interaction that their interpretations were directly related to the kinds of procedures that took place in their classrooms on a daily basis.

L - (Leila), S - (Sonia), A - (Alfredo), R - (Rosalinda), J - (José)

- L: What is reading anyway?  
S: You read off a paper.  
A: When you sound out words.  
L: Sounding out words, what else is reading?  
S: When you read stuff.

- A: When you get a book.  
R: You sound out the words.  
L: Sound out the words, where? In your head?  
S: Your mouth.  
R: Out loud.  
A: And you have to hear with your ears.

Throughout the data collection period, I observed that indeed the students spent most of their reading instruction periods listening to students or the teacher "sound-out" paragraphs in testing materials, worksheets, and other texts. In addition, this focus on saying words may have also been influenced by the focus of listening to words read-aloud on audiotapes of chapter books or classroom texts. Furthermore, this notion of "sounding-out" or saying words was also reiterated when they had to perform how to "sound-out" words that caused difficulty for them.

This phenomena of reading aloud also took other forms as well. For example, to José, reading aloud meant that he could "show-off" his talent as a "good pronouncer." Again, the focus is on performance of decoding, not reading for meaning. This focus on words extended into the students' perceived need to read-aloud. The following interaction illustrates this dependence on reading aloud, which I attribute to the continual practice of having to perform or "prove" that they can read to the teacher for over five years of their school careers.

- L: OK, all right. Now, I'm gonna give you something to read. We have to do this because it's really hard you all keep telling me stuff about the words, "It's the words" But I want you to think 'What about the words?'  
A: I want to read out loud.  
R: Yes Miss, let's read out loud.  
A: On Thursday you said that we could read out loud on Tuesday.  
L: I did? Are you making that up?  
All: No!  
S: You said maybe next time.  
L: Why is it better out loud? ( No answer)  
L: Is it always?  
R: No.  
L: When is it better out loud?  
S: When it's a long story.  
A: When there's not a lot of people in the class, like just six.  
S: Yeah, 'cause then it has to go around the room too many times and you keep waiting for your turn.  
L: What happens when other people are reading in class? What happens to you? You pay attention?  
R: M-hm (yes).  
L: You pay attention when other people are reading?  
All: Yes.  
L: Always?  
All: No!  
J: Sometimes I lose my place.  
A: You don't pay attention at the words.

While the interaction above illustrates the importance the students place on decoding words, it also demonstrates the role that *plática* can take in the deconstruction of practices that are rarely examined in classroom settings.

Another example of how classroom interactions were mirrored in these students' narratives concerned reading for pleasure. For example, when I asked the students to read the story *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1984), so that we could talk about it, Alfredo quickly asked me if they needed to write "the main idea, and P1, P2, P3, on each paragraph." Surprised, I answered, "No, we're doing this for fun! Why would you want to write those things?" His response consisted of "because aren't we going to answer some questions when we finish, and so we'll remember the paragraphs?" This practice of numbering the paragraphs in texts as P1, P2, P3, etc., was what the teachers and students called using "reading strategies" to answer practice test questions for the upcoming TAAS test. This strategy of teaching children to "answer the questions" was yet another recurrent pattern in the data analysis. Again, in interpreting the classroom reading practices that the students mirrored in their narratives, we see that what the students believed about reading was not centered on meaningful interactions with texts.

### Deconstructing and Reconstructing Literacy Learning

In this section, I focus on the role of deconstructing various issues about classroom reading practices that arose in the *pláticas*. In the prior section, I illustrated how excessive classroom use of reading aloud, as related to second language learners, eventually produced decoders and performers rather than children who read for meaning. In response to this limiting form of teaching, I am suggesting that educators must begin to listen to what the children are saying about these practices and others. For example, in earlier discussions, José agreed with the other students that reading aloud is better than reading silently. However, after discussing (deconstructing) and testing the two methods of reading, José reconstructs his thoughts about reading aloud to say:

I... no, I think silently is better now. Because I can like... when I'm reading out loud and I take too long to go back they tell me to keep going, keep going and all that. It's like I didn't have time to go back and look at the words and think about it, like with the class.

On another occasion, the issue of reading silently came up again following the students' reading of the story *El Sapo* by David Rice (1994). Out of this *plática* arose the notion that reading silently can provide a space for students to visualize what they are thinking about the story:

L: Tell me what you were doing in your mind while you're reading the story silently.

R: I was imagining the pictures in my head.

L: Were you?

A: I started imagining when the frog pumped up then that they shoot it.

L: *!Ay que feo!* (How awful!) Gross! What else did you imagine while you were reading the story?

J: I thought like...

S: It was always wet.

A: That's what they called "charcos."

S: I saw like it was always wet there.

L: Okay, you imagined it being damp, wet.

A: I saw a car and the mud went all over.

Through *plática*, we can provide students with an opportunity to be natural inquirers. After considerable discussion and investigating, the children were able to reconstruct their own thoughts about reading aloud. In this sense, the children had the opportunity to participate in what Au (1993) calls *taking ownership* of what they know about their literacy learning.

Another subject that the group deconstructed through *plática* was the role of literature in their understanding of texts. Within this subject, I was interested in helping the students to deconstruct their recurring statements about not being "good readers" by examining where the problem lay—within themselves, within the texts, or both. In a broader sense, this question was addressed in the larger research project, which focused on the role that Mexican American literature played in the reading responses of these children (See Flores-Dueñas, 1997).

For the purposes of this article, however, I continue to narrow the focus to the role of *plática* as a means to critically analyze how the students are able to deconstruct and reconstruct the role of literature in their reading development. Through *plática*, we examined the role of literature by asking the students to list the kinds of literature that they read in their classroom. In response to the question, they named books such as *The Indian in the Cupboard* (Banks, 1980), *Dear Mr. Henshaw* (Cleary, 1983), R.L. Stine's *Goosebumps* series, Ann Martin's *Babysitter's Club*, Beverly Cleary series books, and *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (O'Dell, 1982). Moreover, in my own observations of their classroom books, I noticed that the shelves were mostly limited to stories about middle-class, European American families. During one of our *pláticas*, about literature, I asked, "Do you ever read books about people - like in your family?" Sonia's quick insightful response was "they don't have no books about people like us.... we are never in the books we read."

In another exchange, the students read *Tito, Age 14* (Bode, 1989), an autobiographical story written by a young Mexican immigrant boy who contemplates his new and rather harsh life in the United States. Tito lives in a neighborhood that he considers to be diseased by drugs and violence—not unlike the area of the city where Sonia, Alfredo, Rosalinda, and José lived during the time of this study. When the students responded to *Tito* for the first time, they excitedly told about how drugs, alcohol, smoking, and violence were part of their respective *barrios* and their individual lives. By the second day of talking about this text, however, the focus of the *plática* had changed, it was now more somber and insightful.

L: After reading the story "Tito, Age 14," I want to ask you now... yesterday you said you really liked the story, right?

A: Yes.

L: You would read stories like this?

R: Yes.

L: Yes or no.

All: Yes.

L: Okay, now, do you think that stories that you are interested in reading should be that, should be about drug dealers all the time or some of the time or never or what?

All: Some of the time.

L: What should other stories be about then?

S: Education.

A: Good stuff... Like a boy that goes through all the grades and graduates.

L: Okay, so about school. And who would that boy be?  
S: Him (pointing to José).  
A: Someone who cares about school.  
J: Mexican.

During my analysis of this data, the students' responses were perplexing to me— perhaps they had revealed too much to the group on the first day, or perhaps by the second day, they felt a sadness about where they lived and the various hardships that they had endured on the streets of their neighborhoods. Although it is unclear why they responded so differently between the two days, what is clear is that when they had the opportunity to think critically about the kinds of reading practices that they are subject to on a daily basis, they are able to contribute to their own (and others) thinking.

By the end of the research project, the students were now making more critical contributions to our discussions. Although it was not a simple task to teach them to think freely and critically about issues related to their literacy learning, it was possible. For example, in the following *plática*, the individual students now held different views of what it meant to read. The discussion below took place after I asked, "Tell me what you have learned, individually, from this whole research process that you have gone through with me:"

S: I guess reading can be fun sometimes.  
R: That books can be interesting sometimes even though you don't always understand everything. I feel better about reading. Because at first I thought I could read nothing.  
L: When did you think that?  
R: When I had to come to this research.  
L: Okay, so what makes you feel like you are a better reader?  
S: 'cause when you finish you know...  
J: ...what the story is about.  
L: It depends on what you read, doesn't it?  
R: Yes.  
L: It needs to be what? What kinds of stuff do you need to read then?  
J: I need to read like bilingual books.  
S: Books we're interested in.  
A: Books you understand.  
L: But also do what, what do they sound like?  
A: They sound like you are interested in them.  
J: I learned how to read more better.  
S: Because it's better for you. It made me like wanna read more at home.  
A: If you read at home, when you go to "Judd" (middle school), then you'll know how to read better.  
L: Okay, what else?  
J: I learned how to read more better because before I came here I didn't wanna read at home.  
L: Okay, and now?  
J: Now I do sometimes.  
L: What have you read now, since we started the research?  
J: I read *Sports Illustrated* and Football books.  
L: Those are things you're interested in so you need to get more of those, don't you?  
R: I learned being in this research it's better for me because since we started this I didn't like to read or nothing but you started to give us stories to read and I became more interested in reading books.

L: Which ones?  
R: Any kind, well in Spanish or in English books.  
L: Okay. Sonia, what did you learned in this research process?  
S: I think I've improved by reading more, I used not to read a lot and now I read more than what I used to read.  
L: Let me ask you what makes a good reader now.  
S: A person who's a good reader is a person who pays attention to what they're reading and knows what they're reading.  
A: And understands what they're reading.

In the text above, it is evident that the students have made some adjustments as to how they think about reading. In fact, one year after the data collection was completed for this study, I was able to locate and interview Sonia, Rosalinda, and José (Alfredo had moved to another state). During these interviews, I learned that both Sonia and Rosalinda had read over 20 novels in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Sonia stated the reason she "was into reading now was because you (Leila) had made us read so much and talk so much about it!" When I finally got Rosalinda on the telephone, she greeted me by saying, "Hi Ms. Flores I'm doing good in reading now... it's because I found out I could read. Remember when you told me that I could pronounce words correctly? Since then, I've just been reading and reading." On the other hand, José was not so excited to talk about the books he had read, he simply stated that "they don't let you go to the library over there (referring to his middle school)."

### Conclusions

In this article, I have attempted to illustrate that much can be learned about the literacy learning struggles of second language learners through the medium of *plática*, or intimate talk between the students and the teacher. One could loosely interpret the term *plática* as having a *heart-to-heart* talk with the children about a specific topic, and in this case, about the children's literacy learning. Additionally, I use the term *plática* to describe a form of talk that provides an opportunity for unrestricted discussion about personal truths for the participants. This distinctive form of talk is common among families of Mexican heritage, and perhaps other cultural groups. However, it is my intention to share this "cultural strategy" with all educators who educate bilingual children. Moreover, having *plática* implies that there must be a mutual respect between the participants so that all parties will not be constrained by power or social issues. Therefore, this type of strategy requires that bilingual students be respected and valued for what they can contribute to the field of education.

Historically, valuing what bilingual students have to say about their personal experiences with literature and literacy learning in the U.S. classroom, has not been at the forefront of American educational practice or research. This study, therefore, strives to redefine the ways that culturally and linguistically diverse students are viewed in present-day educational arenas. Furthermore, this investigation assumes that students who are placed in positions of having to constantly negotiate their literacy and personal identities between home, school, community, and larger society, can serve as excellent informants for research. Finally, providing these students with an opportunity to act as inquirers in the creation of a knowledge base about literacy learning can influence them to become critical thinkers about their own reading development.

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