
Original Paper

Contesting institutional positioning: Empowered English learners voice their perspectives in a family literacy program

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Abstract

This study explores how migrant parents advocated for themselves and their children in a family literacy program, revealing complex dynamics between participants and institutions. Through analyzing parents' narratives about learning English during group activities, valuable insights emerged about how families engage or not in educational programs. The findings highlight how parents' voices emerged during ESL classes, while also showing ways that the library either supported or hindered their participation. Using positioning theory analysis, findings show how parents pushed back on attempts by the institution to marginalize them in light of educational reform and local anti-immigration attitudes that attempted to create barriers for immigrant parents by reducing authentic engagement in class.

Keywords: Family Literacy, Adult ESL, Emergent Bilingual Education, Positioning Theory, Institutional Positioning

Introduction

In summer 2023, we launched a family literacy program at a public library after staff requested help supporting their Spanish-speaking patrons' English language needs. Working with university educators, we developed programming based on community input to enhance language development and access to resources. While the program showed promising impacts on families' literacy practices, underlying tensions between parents and library staff emerged that ultimately led to the decision to relocate future sessions.

Nuanced power imbalances and identity struggles between parents and library staff, explained through positioning theory analysis, shows how institutional positioning of the families had negative effects on their experience. Parents repositioned in unique ways, using Spanish to clarify their learning needs and to seek further family resources elsewhere as their requests for more bilingual services at the library were disregarded.

In a Midwestern US city that has 19 schools, 47.8% of students are Hispanic/Latinx; 14% are new English learners. Nearly 53% of all students participate in the federal free and reduced price meal program (IDOE, 2024). Of those city schools, one has a dual-language program; some schools offer pull-out English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. In cultivating a partnership with the public library, this community effort worked closely with parents to extend learning and enrich language development for family members learning English. A parents-as-teachers approach was used, addressing parents' immediate linguistic needs. Bilingual children's books were provided to each family to encourage and support literacy practices at home.

Based on Even Start (2014) programming, daily modalities included: parent-child reading activity; child reading project; literacy-related child motor activity; and ESL classes for parents.

While the core of the study was language instruction, data about reading attitudes and home literacy

practices was collected to better design future programs and inform teaching practices in community schools.

With one professor (the Primary Investigator or PI) and two teacher candidates as facilitators, the project used a Transliteracy approach that explicitly fuses language as practice, language as a system, and language as identity. The learning needs of parents and children were centrally positioned by all facilitators in order to observe their languaging strengths that can be leveraged for new learning (Reynoso, 2022). If Transliteracy is the capacity of students to make meaning across multiple literacy platforms, in this regard, the library limited the capacity for participants to accomplish this. They were unable to develop a significant range of capabilities required to move across a range of media, technologies, and contexts.

Initially, participant families were invited and supported by library administrators when they were meeting socially and not advocating for change. However, when it became apparent that parents shared an interest in requesting bilingual courses and events for themselves and their children at the library, the learning context shifted. This paper seeks to explore the effects of positioning of family members by the institution and how it impacted their learning. Positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990, 2007; Harré et al., 2009) is used to discern what discursive positioning suggests about the identities of parents and children, particularly in the interactions between participants and library staff. In doing so, I aim to add to the extant literature on family literacy that calls for a consideration of parent empowerment as families participate in community- sponsored programs.

Findings show that parents and children benefitted from learning family literacy techniques, particularly in their daily literacy interactions at home. Expanding the initiative is anticipated. Future plans include creating structured community events at the university to promote the Transliteracy practices, including bilingual book clubs, field trips and parent-child workshops to expand multilingual family access to and participation in the community.

Literature Review

Recent literature on adult multilingual learners in family literacy programs is thin. For adult education in general, and in particular with migrant or refugee parents, how parents are positioned often obscures meaningful parental contributions to their children's learning. Research on parental involvement is dominated by deficit approaches to student and family issues when families are not from the dominant majority. The dominant culture has positioned migrant families as lacking and in need of support (Bergset, 2017). In a study of refugee families relocated to Norway, language class narratives revealed how the parents positioned themselves as worthy parents in an interview with a researcher representing the majority. Parents positioned themselves in relation to the community in two ways, either with narratives of success achieved by taking action or narratives of thwarted agency. Unsuccessful narratives were often the result of parents being viewed as passive and uninvolved, or from a sense of resignation from repeated failures. Bergset (2017) referred to this process as a prequel to silencing.

Likewise, in a study of high school students, emergent bilingual learners in one storyline were positioned by the teacher as having little academic agency or knowledge, at least until their English improved. Until this stage, they were characterized as being silent, passive outsiders, except when within the security of the ESL community in the school. This position is similar to the voiceless, victimized migrant position present in community narratives. While the teacher was more likely to adopt this general storyline, the students themselves were not (Allard & Mortimer, 2008). As a theoretical construct, positioning allows agency of interlocutors, along with contradiction among multiple discourses (Davies & Harré, 1990). It can also become a process in which cultural stereotypes are appropriated, and possibly transformed, and returned to the public space (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1994), in ways that manipulation of abstract notions of personhood are visible in interaction in dynamic ways (Allard & Mortimer, 2008). In both studies, institutions and their representatives positioned multilingual learners as lesser, at least until they acquire more language of the majority culture.

Another study of Latinx parents analyzed intersections of urban school reform practices and local anti-immigration measures. The local political climate engendered mechanisms of marginalization for immigrant parents and overlooked opportunities to authentically engage these parents. By inviting

parents into the school, administrators supported Latinx parents as they met socially and did not advocate specific positions. However, as parents' political consciousness grew, recognized how the school system discouraged the functional and meaningful participation of low-income, multilingual parent groups. As this understanding grew, school personnel became resistant to the efforts of these communities (Paredes Scribner & Fernández, 2017).

Another study investigated how multiple spatial histories and institutional positioning cast a particular classroom of individuals as a social configuration. Identities and histories were viewed as geographical and temporal as individual and group identities were shaped across time and space. The study focused on how participants constructed and related social spaces as a social practice of identity development. Teachers for the school-within-a-school had recruited students for the career-focused program, which was considered to be privileged by those students within the school. Although a major programmatic goal was to engage students who were underserved or at risk, as it grew in diversity, so did discursive and racial disagreements among students and acts of othering the minority group (Leander, 2004).

A recent study of group learning in an adult ESL classroom found that not only were opportunities to participate in group learning limited, but social positions taken up by some students may have limited access to resources for other students. While social positioning in group interactions was co-constructed by self and others through discursive practices, for one student, as long as she proactively positioned herself and others, discourse remained productive and provided participatory opportunities for the entire group. However, when another student felt that his poor English skills, rather than group exclusion, made him a weak learner, he made fewer and fewer agentive discursive moves. His forced self-positioning changed with the help of teacher support. In this study, learning English was highly influenced by the specific context of dynamics of interaction including teacher intervention, participant dispositions and responses, characteristics of the task and personal attributes in positioning. Authors stressed that teachers should encourage construction of positive positioning for each student and each other in collaborative learning (Wang & Ai, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

Identity, Literacy, and the Social Construction of Self

Identity emerges through the formation and awareness of self—a developmental process fundamentally rooted in social interaction. As minds develop within social contexts, people internalize the perceptions and practices they encounter, including literate practices. This intricate connection between literacy and identity reveals how our sense of self is inseparable from our communicative practices (McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Mead & Mind, 1934; Vygotsky, 1978). Building on Vygotsky's (1978) foundational insight that cultural development appears first on the social level before manifesting individually, positioning theory offers a powerful framework for understanding these dynamics (Harré, 2008).

Positioning theory rests on a crucial principle: participants in any social episode—whether collaborative learning or casual conversation—do not necessarily enter on equal footing. Access to the rights and duties needed to perform meaningful actions depends on the particular moment, the specific people present, and the social dynamics at play.

Positions emerge through discursive processes where individuals are ascribed roles, take them up, refuse them, or actively contest them. These positions carry with them particular rights and duties within the immediate social context. Critically, people position one another based on perceived identities, and these identities are neither fixed nor stable. Instead, identity flows dynamically through interactions, constructed and reconstructed as individuals make or refute claims in relation to—or in contrast with—others (Mishler, 1999; Sarup, 1998). Positions connect both to the storylines that unfold during interactions and to the acts that reveal participants' intentional meanings (Harré, 2012).

The Triad: Positions, Storylines, and Speech Acts

Positioning theory views interactions as composed of three interconnected elements: positions, storylines, and speech acts. Davies and Harré (1999) describe positioning as the practice in which people are both subjectively and observably engaged participants located within conversations as they jointly produce story lines. Each element plays a distinct yet interrelated role: Positions function as the

social rights and duties that participants must navigate during interactions. These positions may apply not only to individual speakers but to entire groups, cultures, or institutions (Hirvonen, 2016), revealing how power operates across multiple scales. Storylines represent the patterns of interaction that typically unfold in particular social arenas (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). Speech acts are social actions that others recognize as socially significant and in so doing contribute to current and emerging storylines. Speech acts include not only oral language but also other semiotic resources used for social purposes among interlocutors (Pinnow & Chval, 2015). These patterns weave together multiple semiotic resources—language, gesture, gaze, physical movement—to evoke existing narratives familiar to group members or to introduce new narratives still unknown to some participants. Storylines carry the weight of history and background while simultaneously shaping ongoing interactions (Hirvonen, 2016).

Speech acts are those social actions recognized by others as significant contributions to existing or emerging storylines. Far from being limited to spoken words, speech acts encompass all semiotic resources deployed for social purposes among participants (Pinnow & Chval, 2015). Through speech acts, positions are established, adopted, modified, or challenged—potentially transforming the storyline itself.

Positioning Theory as a Lens for Identity

Positioning theory provides a particularly valuable lens for examining identity because it recognizes intrapersonal relations as positioning practices deeply embedded in culture. The theory allows researchers to explore how and why people position themselves in certain ways—whether consciously or unconsciously—within particular situations and spaces. Through discursive positioning analysis (Davies & Harré, 2007), we can examine how individuals position themselves and are positioned by others as insiders or outsiders, members or nonmembers of communities.

Research Purpose and Questions

This study employs positioning theory to closely examine power relations and identities within a family literacy program, moving from the micro perspective of individuals within families to the macro perspective of institutional positioning. The central questions guiding this investigation are:

- When social positioning varies among groups and individuals, how does relational positioning by teachers and the library as an institution impact learning?
- How were family literacy participants socially positioned toward learning opportunities, and how did this positioning affect their ongoing participation?

Addressing Gaps in the Literature

While existing research on positioning and emergent bilingualism includes studies of elementary classrooms, out-of-school programs, and teacher-student dynamics, significant gaps remain. Few studies examine how student groups position one another in these contexts. Similarly, with limited funding for family literacy programs, research in this area remains sparse. This study addresses both gaps, offering insights into the complex positioning dynamics that shape family literacy experiences and outcomes.

Methods

To answer the research questions, data are drawn from a collective case study design (Stake, 1995) of the family literacy project that met eight times in three-hour sessions. Ultimately the group included one grandparent, three mothers and eight children, aged 6-12 years. Pseudonyms were selected for all participants. Institutional Research Board approval and informed consent/assent was attained accordingly.

Parents and children met together in the library conference room for the first hour as one of the facilitators modeled the day's literacy concept with a bilingual take-home book. During the second hour, children went with teacher candidates to a dedicated children's space, the activity room of the library's youth services department. The PI taught English as a Second Language to parents in the conference room. For the third hour, families re-grouped and discussed the literacy theme for the day and showcased the children's projects.

For ESL class, a Freirean approach was taken. Students selected topics for study, based on their lived needs. Chosen topics included English pronunciation and comprehensibility, communication with medical personnel, and “food” language for grocery shopping and recipes.

Table 1. Daily Planning Chart

July 3	Friendship	Raising a bilingual child in a language-rich home	Model read-alouds	<i>Amigo Cat & Dog</i>	Introductions, assessments Icebreakers: salad game, ball toss game
July 10	Colors	Reading with your child: when, where, how <i>De Colores</i>	Techniques to help parents enhance attention to text in the story	<i>Y is for Yum, Yum, Yum</i>	Paper flowers
July 12	Weather	Asking questions of the text	Model questioning techniques	<i>Erizo y Conejo</i>	Thermometers, snow, bubbles
July 17	Community	Inviting children’s comments and predictions	Model how to ask about making predictions	<i>Taking a Walk</i>	Making the ideal city
July 19	Pets (Animals)	Text selection of bilingual/other books	Where to find good bilingual books?	<i>Big Dog, Little Dog</i>	Twister, puppets if time
July 24	Poetry	Creating meaningful writing experiences	Promoting drawing and writing at home	<i>Flutter & Hum</i>	Parachutes with rhyming words, telephone
July 26	Celebration Identity	Sharing knowledge in English and Spanish All-	Story-share	<i>Margaret and Margarita</i>	Big paper activity/Final assessments

All activities focused on participants’ development of English language, enhancement of literacy abilities, and productive classroom interactions (see Chval, Pinnow, & Thomas, 2014 for more information). Over the course of the program, the PI met individually with each adult eight times to discuss English language supports and future plans and aspirations for family members. After the first two sessions, the children’s youth coordinator sat in on the ESL classes while another librarian checked in on the children’s activities at 10-15 minute intervals. It was determined that after the second session at least two participants had inquired about the possibility of bilingual computer classes for adults.

My Positionality

As a white, cisgender, middle-class woman who speaks Spanish as a second language, I recognize both the privileges and limitations this brings when working with diverse communities. Being a university representative and non-native Spanish speaker shaped how I approached this work. While my Spanish fluency helped build connections, I was careful not to position myself as an authority on Latinx experiences. I aimed to use my skills to improve access while amplifying perspectives different from my own, though library policies sometimes created barriers. Throughout the project, I worked to maintain awareness of how my identity influenced my role. I worked to maintain critical self-awareness in order to be a more effective advocate and representative.

Data Selection and Analysis

Considering individual roles with regard to the group aims, data was triangulated across surveys, interviews, and focus group interactions. Positioning was tracked across parent groups, parents with children, groups with teachers, and then, as the context changed, discussed as whole-group positioning by the institution. Data was collected as part of each meeting. As storylines evolved among family members, conversation and activities centered on family literacy practices, reading in English and

Spanish, language preferences, and oracy. Parents completed home literacy practice checklists before and after the program, and one interview each, conducted by the PI. Children created art and movement activities based upon the day's book and additionally completed a Garfield Reading Interest Survey administered by facilitators at the beginning and end of the program, administered by the two teacher candidates.

Data analysis was recursive, completed in iterations continually moving between the data and the theoretical framework. Data analysis reflects the theoretical approach adopted, in this case, positioning theory (Gu, Patkin & Kirkpatrick, 2013). NVivo software was used in analysis, searching common themes and discussion topics that included summer activities, community interactions, reading interests and children's schooling. Positioning was tracked in each and strengths and challenges of learning English undergirded most communication. Parent perceptions were impacted by a policy change during the second week that required a librarian present in the conference room, and checks on the teacher candidates in the child activity room each quarter hour. All classes continued as scheduled, but parents related how the feeling of being watched made them uncomfortable.

Transcribed interviews and conversations were analyzed as texts and considered biliteracy events in place of storylines. When interlocutors implicitly or explicitly reference storylines in conversation, as they take up positions in the story, speakers locate themselves

in relation to each other (Allard & Mortimer, 2008). Likewise, in biliteracy events, speakers use one or more languages to convey meaning.

Findings and Discussion

Transliteracy, the deepening understanding of subject matter and development of competence with the new language across multiple media platforms occurred to a limited degree. Media used for communication included a media projector used for introducing vocabulary, short informational texts, notebooks for tracking ideas, and markers with large easel pads for collaborative work. Transliteracy routines evolved during ESL class with parents, as evidenced by choices of what to study, how to study, and the relevance they reported that this instruction had for their daily lives. Language practices addressed difficulties parents shared regarding basic interpersonal communication in public places, such as their children's schools and doctor's offices.

Language systems expanded as they worked at creating sample health history interviews and grocery store interactions. Likewise, these language systems reflected individual identity as interlocutors drew on past experiences and personal creativity in completing learning tasks.

Positioning as 'the discursive production of selves' (Davies & Harré, 1990) has informed the analyses. In evaluating the parents' utterances, I sought both what Davies and Harré (1990) call *reflexive* and *interactive* positioning.

Table 2. Positioning Chart

Name	Personal Goal	Program Goal	Recent ESL Class	Reactions to Oversight
Lorena	She is looking for a job. Her goals are to get her GED, improve English literacy, to be a better parent. She wants especially to help her children.	She joined the program half for the library access and half for the English classes	"They told us what to say at school. What to do."	"Why is that lady here?" [Laughs] "Why does she tell us 'honeydew'?" "Can we do more classes when the summer ends?"
Mariana	Her personal goals are to improve her English, become a better parent, and to get to know other adults	She joined the program for the family literacy activities.	"It was not for us it was for the school. They tell us what to do. We know what to	"How can I take more? I want the computer class." "Where is the other

	in similar circumstances.		do.”	bilingual teachers?”
Isabel	Goals include improving her English and getting to know other adults in the community.	She joined the family literacy program at the insistence of a friend.	“I don’t like that class.”	“No me gusta la mujer aquí. ¿Porqué siempre viene y no hace nada?” “¿De nuevo? ¿Otra vez? ¿Porqué?”
Sofia	Her goals include improving English literacy, to be a better parent, and meet other adults in the community.	She joined the family literacy program to continue her English studies from an earlier library program.	Did not take previous class.	Quit
Reina	Her personal goals include getting work and improving her English.	She joined the family literacy program to improve her English.	“Want to know more English. I know what they say to me.”	Quit
Jasmin	Her goal is to improve her English literacy.	She joined the family literacy program for the overall program.	Last course “Pérdida de tiempo.”	Quit

Reflexive positioning refers to the positioning of oneself. For example, Lorena wrote that she joined the program, half for the library access and half for the ESL classes. She has foregrounded her own needs, speaking as a job-seeker interested in further library offerings rather than a parent fostering literacy practices at home.

Lorena’s positioning became interactive as she spoke about a former ESL course that was offered at the library and taught by bilingual teachers from her children’s school.

PI: So you’ve already taken English this summer?

Lorena: [Crinkles nose] They told us what to say at school. What to do. Isabel: I did not like that class. [Laughs.]

Reina: Want to know more English. I know what they say to me. PI: So it was for the school, too easy?

Lorena, Isabel, and Reina voiced criticism of the narrow scope of a previous class at the library taught by teachers from the dual-language school where their children attend. Apparently what had been offered as an ESL course was limited to how to communicate with school faculty and staff and completion of registration forms for their children.

Interactive positioning refers to how a speaker positions others during conversation. In a similar narrative, for example, Jasmin discussed her communications with teachers at her child’s school. She mentioned that meaning is clearly expressed at school. As she gestured to the librarian sitting in the room, she switched to Spanish and said that here it was less so, despite frequent visits with her own children to the youth services department. School staff is positioned as more expert than library staff with communications.

Harré et al (2009, p. 9) stresses seeking the moral context generated from rights and obligations evident in analyzed interlocution. This has informed the third aspect of positioning in the analyses: The

positions that parents produce for themselves, regardless of consequences, as a place to speak and act from, fostering allowances for certain performances (Bergset, 2017).

As Jasmin had switched to Spanish when speaking of clarity of communication in school versus library contexts, some but not all adult learners switched to Spanish to voice frustration or concern about being supervised during class in the library.

Isabel: No me gusta la mujer aquí. ¿Porqué siempre viene y no hace nada? [Laughs] (I don't like that woman here. Why does she always come and do nothing?)

Lorena: [Also laughing] Why is that lady here?

Nested among the biliteracy events were social positioning moves that both created coherence among adult learners and empowered their learning. In a subsequent class, Isabel asked, “¿De nuevo? ¿Otra vez? ¿Porqué?” (Once more? Again? Why?) to which others responded with more laughter. Jasmin and Mariana would discuss the same librarian while she sat in the room. Knowing that she did not speak or understand Spanish, they spoke freely about her in Spanish.

Another day, Lorena called attention to how the observing librarian called out a suggestion during ESL class. Lorena had had her hand up and was intending to respond, but instead stated,

“Why does she tell us ‘honeydew’?” The statement, spoken in English, was not only acknowledgement of her frustration, but also intended to be heard by the librarian.

Participation patterns demonstrate how discussion of commonalities in community agencies such as the elementary school and library provided opportunities for reflection and affirmation of participants' perceptions. All positioned the “observing” children's librarian as intrusive and would question her presence while she was in the room.

Nonetheless, as adult students made meaning across multiple literacy platforms on varied topics, the library limited the capacity for participants to develop new skills further. Instead of assisting in the development of a wider range of capabilities required to move across a range of media, specifically with online technologies, and contexts (Reynoso, 2022) library staff would not consider this option for Spanish-speaking patrons.

For example, Lorena had reflexively positioned herself as a fluent English speaker and guide for newer students. She was the first to request a bilingual computer course at the front desk of the library.

Mariana was next to inquire about bilingual or Spanish computer courses. She also had a teacher candidate ask for more information about why there were no library course offerings in Spanish. Sofia, Jasmin, Lorena, and Isabel had also requested more Spanish programming onsite at the library at the front desk. All were told either, “not at this time” or “we do not have that here.” Three students, uncomfortable being watched during ESL class, and frustrated with not having other learning needs addressed, opted out of the program after the first day of observation by the librarian.

While remaining students supported one another in class, reflexively positioning themselves and interactively positioning each other as engaged English learners and dedicated parents-as-teachers in the family literacy element, the institution positioned them as peripheral others at best, and at worst, outsiders whose actions within the library needed to be watched.

Implications

This othering, in which an institutional representative monitored English learners to ascertain that they remained on task, is an example of racializing language practices. Davies and Harré (1990) explain that conversational actions are embedded in sociohistorical context and intertwined with participants' experiences of previous positionings and power imbalances, including those entrenched in race and gender. For example, in the US, Latinx adults are often depicted as lacking full proficiency in either English or Spanish and in need of linguistic remediation to provide them with access to sophisticated language required for complex thinking processes and successful engagement in the global economy (Flores, 2016). Raciolinguistic ideologies are rooted in colonialism and support white supremacy by suggesting linguistic deficiencies are the core of inequalities of racialized communities. Instead of

recognizing the complex linguistic knowledge that multilingual learners have developed as part of their lived experience, institutions and their representatives view the resolution to these racial inequalities is to adapt those language practices to that of the dominant culture. One way of shifting this role as instructor and community member is to develop new subject positions that center adult learners' complex linguistic knowledge while shifting literacy practices and stances that inform mainstream representations of these practices (Flores, 2019; Rosa & Flores, 2017).

Although inequities can be produced and reproduced through the construction of storylines that emerge from experience with oppressive narratives into the current space and time, constructing subject positions (Davies & Harré, 1990) they do not have to be permanent or accepted. In this project, the library had produced this position with no foreseeable alternative options. These positionings, and their subsequent socially determinate actions do not just adhere the storylines of common oppressive cultural narratives, but students chose to resist these negative positionings through their own discursive practices by crafting new and different storylines.

Conclusion

The collaboration unearthed moments where understanding and acceptance was sometimes achieved and sometimes disrupted. "Our findings reveal limitations to equitable outcomes across disparate groups working together, particularly around identity markers like race or neurological difference." ("Positioning self and other: building equity literacy in collaboration ...") ("Positioning self and other: building equity literacy in collaboration ...") To be sure, in this project, these disruptions were subtle rather than blatant instances of bullying or explicitly offensive statements. However, we believe that these more nuanced positionings warrant closer exploration as they are often ignored, skipped over or go by entirely unnoticed by those in positions of privilege.

The current study builds on previous emergent bilingual learner positioning studies by closely examining the links between social positioning and language learning in a novel context, that of a family literacy program. It seeks to examine how positioning mediates learners' access to classroom interactions. Perhaps the greatest value in this current study is that it describes the process of how adult learners' construct and reconstruct their positional identities across contexts local contexts and across interactions instead of just moment-to-moment interactions. Exploring the interactions within this family literacy project adds another dimension to understanding the impact of social positioning on second language learning and use with adults by considering both micro and macro levels of communication.

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