THE PERSONAL ESSAY AND ACADEMIC WRITING PROFICIENCY IN SPANISH HERITAGE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

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Traditionally, Spanish Heritage Language (HL) university courses focus on developing advanced literacy skills in order to equip students with broader writing repertoires as a way of complementing the level of Spanish oral command that they already bring into the classroom. Building on the fundamental interconnectedness of language use and the social context, previous research has used Systemic Functional Linguistics (Colombi, 2003, 2006) as well as other explicit writing strategies (Potowski, 2010) as tools for the development of academic writing. These have been used to analyze and teach a variety of common academic genres such as reports, critical analyses, and the expository and argumentative essay in the Spanish HL classroom. Little work has been done, however, to analyze the academic role of the *personal essay* as a functional component of courses for HL speakers at the university level. SLA researchers such as Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) have advocated for the use of 'first-person narratives' as a legitimate complement to more observational/experimental and traditional research methodologies. They indirectly echo what psychology scholar Pennebaker (1990, 2004) calls the 'reconstruction of self,' that is, the reconstruction through writing of life experiences that represent some level of significance to the language learner, who is, above all, deeply situated in social activity. Drawing on Gee's Discourse Theory (1999) and other scholarly research in New Literacy Studies, this paper suggests that the functional incorporation of journaling and the personal essay as academic practices can inform the teaching of advanced literacy in the HL classroom. The article brings into the foreground the concept of advanced literacy not as merely the mastery of traditional academic registers, but also as a reconstructive social tool necessary for the incorporation of the HL voice, which I suggest is crucial in heritage language development.

SPANISH AS A HERITAGE LANGUAGE UNIVERSITY COURSE: EXISTING AND CONTINUING CHALLENGES

Recently, a survey conducted by the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP) revealed that the great majority of teachers across the nation consider scholarly research in the field of teaching Spanish as a Heritage Language as "most urgent" (Roca & Colombi, 2003). The wide demographic changes occurring across the country's educational institutions of all levels and the lack of professional development for educators echo these teachers'—and many others'—concerns. Since the enrollment numbers of native or near-native Spanish speakers in courses that study Spanish as a foreign language continue to grow, teachers and administrators at educational institutions in the United States have to confront the urgent need to invest in the study of Spanish not only as a "foreign language" but also one that studies Spanish as a "heritage language".

Even though the teaching of Spanish as a Heritage Language has been a relevant topic of inquiry for researchers and educators since the 1970s, the database for the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) reports that in 2012 there were only 21 programs that offered Spanish for Heritage/Native Speakers at the university level in the United States (Reznicek-Parrado, 2013). According to Ingold, Rivers, Tesser and Ashby (2002), only 18% of universities in the United States offered Spanish courses for Heritage Learners in the early 21st century. Additionally, Rhodes and Branaman (1999) estimated that in 1997 only 7% of US high schools offered courses specifically designed for Heritage Language speakers of Spanish. This means that the great majority of Latino students who enroll in Spanish courses, both at the high school and the university level, still receive instruction in their native tongue as if it were a foreign language.

The courses for Spanish as a Heritage Language (HL) that have managed to become implemented as part of the core program at various universities have traditionally focused on developing literacy skills in order to equip students with broader writing repertoires. These courses are envisioned in order to complement the oral proficiency in Spanish that Heritage Language Speakers already bring into the classroom. Educators have concentrated on the development of "academically appropriate" literacy, that is, on ways to explicitly teach HL students how to differentiate between the informal oral registers that they master and the more formal academic (written) genres such as the writing of expository and argumentative essays, reports, literary analyses, among others. For example, Colombi (2003) uses Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to suggest that advanced literacy in the HL classroom should be explicitly taught in order to develop students' academic registers, as seen in analyses of students' argumentative essays. In a similar fashion, Potowski (2010) relies on a variety of socially relevant topics to incorporate specific steps that consider technical and stylistic challenges in order to explicitly guide HL students of Spanish in the development of academically relevant products. These technical and stylistic challenges include writing appropriate theses, utilizing effective connectors, adopting a neutral voice, conceiving well-written titles, considering audiences, among other topics. Potowski's book (2010), *Conversaciones escritas,* guides students into the writing process through formal written exercises that incorporate a variety of relevant topics, such as immigration, bilingual education, health and technology. Considering Colombi's and Potowski's examples above, explicit instruction of academic writing seems to be considered king in the field, much like it is in introductory English composition university courses, as well as in more advanced university courses of Spanish as a foreign language.

Courses that teach advanced literacy in the HL classroom have been limited to the development of traditional academic registers. Researchers and educators in the field of Spanish as a Heritage Language have invested energy and effort in studying and conceiving more appropriate ways of teaching skills that, presumably, any English-dominant university student in the humanities should possess: analyzing a work of literature, a significant historical event, taking a stance and developing appropriate theses, etc. This, of course, is very clearly essential in the development of Spanish academic writing proficiency for Heritage Language Speakers as well. Ultimately however, scholars have tirelessly advocated for a fundamental separation in the curriculum between Spanish as a heritage language and Spanish as a foreign language, but the same traditional conception of advanced literacy—specifically, one that promotes the same traditional academic genres—is implemented in both groups. In this paper, I explore the incorporation of the personal essay, or the first-person narrative as an academic genre in the Spanish as a heritage language curriculum. My intention is to advocate for the conception of HL advanced literacy not as merely the mastery of traditional academic genres, but to bring forth

students' personal reflections of their experience as young bilingual and bicultural individuals and their voice as a crucial component of their academic experience.

THE COMPLEXITY OF DISCOURSES: ADVANCED LITERACY AS AN INHERENTLY SOCIAL PRACTICE

One of the very basic arguments for the separation of the study of Spanish as Heritage Language and Spanish as a Foreign Language at the university level is that the early social and linguistic experiences of Heritage Language Speakers of Spanish are immensely different from those of L2 learners of Spanish. As educators, we assume that these early social and linguistic experiences have fundamental repercussions in the development of the academic system of Spanish for students who wish to enroll in courses of Spanish as a Heritage Language at the university level. Moreover, the embedded stories of these students' lives as children of immigrants, bilingual speakers of both stigmatized and non-stigmatized varieties of Spanish, and citizens of a country other than the one of their heritage, deserve a common space of exploration. Given these vary basic presumptions about the conception of the Spanish Heritage Language curriculum at the university level and because the focus of this paper is on advanced literacy development, I believe it is helpful to turn to scholars in the field of New Literacy Studies in order to conceptualize which additional components may inform literacy teaching in Spanish HL courses at the university level.

For New Literacy scholars, literacy has consequences that go hand in hand with the social context. New Literacy research opposes the traditional conception of SLA and literacy as a "neutral technology that can be detached from specific social contexts" (Street, 1984, p. 1) and refuses to consider literacy as an isolated independent variable before it can study its consequences. This rather recent field (born in the 80's) considers how writing has repercussions that involve democratic principles such as human rights, participation in society and ultimately, social justice. Additionally, this group of scholars considers that there is not just one literacy, but rather, that because "particular practices promote particular skills" (Scribner and Cole, 1981) there are several litera*cies*, which are multiple and highly contextualized (Mennard-Warwick, 2005).

Even though there are many scholars who fit within the framework of New Literacy studies (Street, 1984; Heath, 1983; Scribner and Cole, 1981, among many others) I find it most helpful to turn to Gee's Discourse Theory (1999) in order to conceptualize how the social context of Heritage Language Speakers of Spanish are inherently embedded in their literacies, as well as how teaching academic writing to this group of students is ultimately a social justice issue.

Beyond a linguistic practice, Gee conceives writing a *social practice*, looking at reading and writing not just in and of themselves, but as "they are embedded within specific social practices" (Gee, 2002, p. 159). In order to explain reading and writing as social practices, Gee differentiates (lower-case d) "discourses" from (upper case D) "Discourses." Gee refers to discourses as simple representations of the written or spoken utterances of language in use that are purely linguistic, and Discourses as the "how we are" and the "what we do" that allows us to enact or recognize a specific and distinctive *socially-situated identity* (Gee, 2002):

> [Discourses are] ways of being in the world (being a first-grader in Ms. Smith's progressive classroom; being a US generative linguist; or a LA Latino teenage street-

gang member, etc.) or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes (Gee, 2002, p. 160)

A Discourse is a sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize (Gee, 1989, p. 7)

Our exposure to Discourses as human beings, logically enough, begins in our early years. Gee identifies the very first unit of socialization in our lives during our childhood as the "primary Discourse," which provides us with our every day language (our 'vernacular') and the very first ways in which we conceive the world. When we become older and enter into the more public spheres of social interaction (e.g., when we begin grade school, middle school, high school, college, our very first job, etc.) Gee explains that we enter into a "secondary Discourse" that provides us with broader and more varied discourses as well as Discourses. Within the secondary Discourse we come into contact with what he identifies as "Discourse models," defined as "narratives, schemas, images or (partial) theories that explain why and how certain things are connected or pattern together . . . these are simplified pictures of the world" and are seen as such "from the perspective of a particular Discourse" (Gee, 2002, p. 166). Essentially, a Discourse model is that which is taught (the subject matter) and the ways it is understood should be taught, forming the expectations that schools hold for its students. Discourse models, then, become "shared information" which has the potential to become "common knowledge."

It is important to consider that, even though Discourse models emerge within secondary Discourses, a process known as 'filtering' (Gee, 2002) might allow secondary Discourses to appear even earlier. This happens when young children are exposed to Discourses used in school as a product of early exposure to reading and writing as well as to values, attitudes, motivations, ways of interacting, and other practices more common to secondary Discourses. For example, young children whose parents encourage school-like reading in the home during the child's early years previous to schooling might experience greater success in reading courses once they begin formal instruction.

Figure 1. A possible illustration of Gee's Discourse Theory (1999)
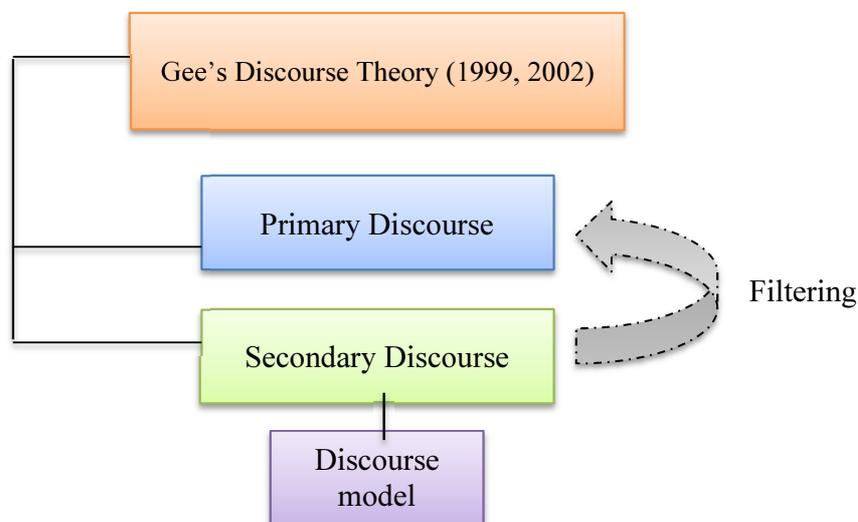
Just as Gee considers Discourses to be embedded in social practices, he considers meaning to be embedded in social experiences. For Gee, meaning doesn't just happen; something does not simply mean the same thing to everyone. For this reason, he conceives meaning to be "situated," or rooted in *embodied* experience: "One has to see the meaning as a pattern extracted from the concrete data of experience. To do so one must have had lots of practice with experiences that trigger (a particular) pattern" (Gee, 2002, p. 164). In other words, the more filtering you experience as a young learner, the more practice you have with the situated meanings found in the Discourse models of school; the more you were read to as a child, the more familiar you will be with reading once it is introduced in school and the more success you will have acquiring reading skills.

Discourse Models and Situated Meaning in Schools: The Importance of Exterior Discourses

Gee has always taken particular interest in the system of school and schooling as a potential epicenter for inequality. We explore the concept of Discourse models and situated meaning here because these are essential to illustrating how early life experiences either create advantages or disadvantages for students when entering secondary Discourses in schools. Gee states that in schools authentic beginners are those students who have not experienced filtering and come into secondary Discourses with very little capital. We highlight here that because of a series of complex social factors such as immigration, discrimination, and lack of opportunities, minority students such as Heritage Language Speakers of Spanish will most likely have experienced less filtering during their entrance into secondary Discourses. For example, Llagas reports that only 39% of Latino households read to their children before entering school, compared to 64% of white households and 44% African-American households (2003). Consequently, the situated meanings of these minority students are less likely to match those set forth by the Discourse models found in institutions of education, establishing many Heritage Language Speakers as *authentic beginners*, as per Gee's definition.

A very delicate balance must be reached in schools in order for learning to be more equitable. As Gee (2002) notes, even though Discourse models are "inert, or good only for mouthing 'common sense' or writing down theories in tests, *classrooms very often give learners pieces of theories without any situated meanings for the words in the theory*" (p. 167, emphasis). On the other hand, in the absence of Discourse models, "situated meanings fail to hang together and lack any generality" (p. 167). What is ideal are educational practices that allow for a symbiotic relationship where learners are able to enter a Discourse model through their own situated meaning but are guided by the same Discourse model's theories, which, in turn, create more general, shared and coherent information. I believe one of these practices is the exploration of the personal essay through which students can make relevant their situated meanings in the Discourse they know best (i.e., being bicultural and bilingual.) Concurrently, through the practice of the personal essay as an academic genre, HL speakers can be guided through models of literacy that fit into Discourse models already in place, allowing for greater academic success. This point will be further explored in the next section of this paper.

In addition to Discourse models, Gee (2002) conceives several other sub-Discourses that appear as part of the schooling experience: the sorting Discourse, the in-house Discourse and the exterior Discourse. According to Gee, the sorting Discourse is that which recruits students' words, beliefs, values, etc., to sort them into "evaluative categories of a greater variety: 'good student,' 'bad students, 'learning disabled', etc." (Gee, 2002, p. 174). In this way, schools close

their doors to a particular type of student whose primary Discourse does not "fit" that of the Discourse model of the school, sorting out who is accepted into the institution and who is not. For those who are accepted and make it through the sorting, Gee states they must now face an "in-house Discourse", where "acceptable" ways of being a certain kind of student reflect whether one is successful or not. In-house Discourses position students as certain sorts of learners engaged in certain sorts of ways (and not others) with words, beliefs, values, etc. Thirdly, Gee identifies the exterior Discourse as another potential Discourse present in school, in which he believes learners are required to master some set of social practices, in depth, "that have integral connections, in words, deeds, and identity formation, to related practices outside school" (Gee, 2002, p. 174). Specifically, Gee (2002) conceives exterior Discourses as classroom simulations of outside Discourses where students "walk the walk and talk the talk, in some respects, of a Discourse whose main home is not the school" (p. 174). Gee states that even though the exterior Discourse is the least visible in schools, it is the most crucial for authentic beginners.

Figure 1.2: *Gee's Discourses in schools (2002)*
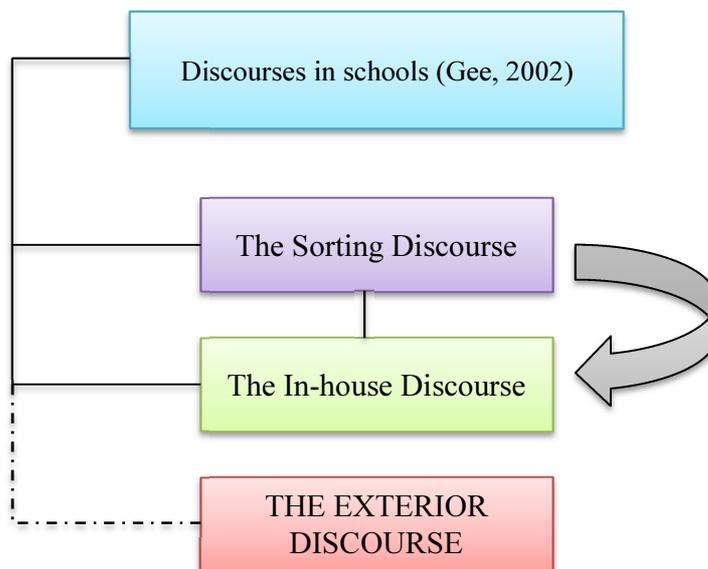
In his analysis of Discourses in schools, Gee concludes that educators who deal with authentic beginners in their classes (such as Heritage Speakers of Spanish) must gain meta-awareness about how all the specific Discourses that are at play have repercussions within the institution of schooling (e.g., the university). Authentic beginners, according to Gee, must "gain embodied experience within Discourses that can offer them new and valued identities" (Gee, 2002, p. 174).

When we conceptualize how the early social and linguistic experiences that make part of a student's primary discourse affect their later success or failure in school, it is relevant to include particular situated meanings (those of the student) into Discourse models of school—in our case particularly into the Discourse model of advanced literacy in Heritage Language Development. Were we to consider their relative absence of filtering and the necessary development of exterior Discourses, would we be creating better opportunities for success in

advanced literacy for Heritage Speakers of Spanish at the university level? I suggest that part of the answer is considering the personal essay, which incorporates the student's voice, as a core component of the Spanish as a HL curriculum.

FINDING VOICE: A RECONSTRUCTION OF SELF

In a 2010 article, Lo-Philip relies on Gee's Discourse Theory to conceptualize a theoretical framework of Heritage Language literacy. She states that this theory is "helpful in capturing the relationships between language, identity, and the larger social, cultural, and historical context that are implicated in the process of writing" (p. 283). Along the same line, Wang (2004) further emphasizes the complexity of Discourses present specifically for students who are members of minority groups and who speak Heritage Languages. She argues that for HL learners there are two additional ever-present macro Discourses that she labels *heritage Discourses* and *dominant Discourses* (p. 56). Heritage Discourses surround the particular Heritage Language as well as the community of immigrants that speak the HL languages in the host country. Dominant Discourses, on the other hand, are those of the majority and the powerful in the host country, consisting of Discourses on national identity and official languages. Consequently, Lo-Philip (2010) concludes that "it is clear, then, that HL learners are impacted by multiple Discourses, some of which are not relevant, accessible, or directly impact non-HL learners" (p. 291).

Lo-Philip notices, however, that while Gee's Discourse Theory is a helpful way to articulate how language is connected to other symbolic systems and larger macro-social ideologies, it does not do much in capturing *how* identities, or situated meanings, are enacted through discourse and within a particular Discourse. Lo-Philip then suggests that it is through *voice*, or the utterance, that "identities are (re)constructed" (p. 283).

The incorporation of voice and the (re)construction of identity through literacy has been widely researched in L2 development. Researchers such as Menard-Warwick, Norton, Wang, Pavlenko and Lantolf have argued that "learning a language or taking on new literacies in a particular context has consequences for the identities of its users" (Mennard-Warwick, 2005, p. 254). What I want to highlight here is that there is a dearth of work in how the Heritage Learner might *also* take on a particular identity through the appropriation of his or her voice, and how this may have important repercussions when programs that teach and study languages as Heritage Languages are conceived.

I link the appropriation of voice here to the writing of journals, or more specifically, of personal essays[1]. Even though researchers such as Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) have focused primarily on L2 learners, I believe that the way in which they highlight the relevancy of first-person narratives in the understanding of L2 development is very relevant in the field of HL development as well, especially as it relates to creating a particular situated meaning that, if incorporated into the Discourse model of academic writing, may provide important information about Heritage Language Development.

Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) view the learning of a language not just as the acquisition of a linguistic system, but also as the struggle of socially situated beings to *participate* in another culture (p. 155). In other words, proficiency (or advanced literacy) in the L2 is seen here as a tool for incorporation into other Discourses and not simply as the mastery of a new set of grammatical, lexical and phonological forms. Indeed, Sfard (1998) presents a new metaphor, the *participation metaphor* (PM) which he believes has emerged in the education literature not

replacing but complimenting the traditional view of learning an L2 as a process of acquisition (the *acquisition metaphor*, "AM") (p. 5-7): "While AM focuses on the individual and the internalization of knowledge, PM stresses contextualization and engagement with others in its attempt to investigate the *how*" (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000, p. 156). For these reasons, these researchers believe that first-person narratives have the potential to provide a legitimate and much richer source of data than do the third-person observations of more traditional SLA methodologies. Learners, in Pavlenko and Lantolf's (2005) view, have the agency to reconstruct their identity through dialogue between Discourses: "narrative explanation is retroactive in that it clarifies events with respect to the outcome that follow from the events; hence, it is about *reconstruction*" (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, p. 161).

The process of reconstruction using agency and voice through writing has also been widely studied in the field of Psychology. Though a psychological framework may seem widely separated from the field of literacy studies and heritage language pedagogy, the same intimate relationship between voice, agency and writing is explored in the work of Pennebaker (1990, 2004) a Psychology scholar who specializes in trauma studies. Pennebaker has devoted his career to demonstrating that the systematic exploration of voice through journaling shows profound psychological, physiological and even physical changes in trauma patients of a variety of backgrounds. He centers his work on the very human necessity for connection, and shows that both laboratory and real world investigations demonstrate that it is difficult, if not impossible, to experience intense emotions without sharing them with others. He suggests that being emotionally honest is the first step towards recovery, and that because writing encourages restructuring and reorganization of thoughts, it forces patients to slow down thinking processes, to follow ideas to logical conclusions and to focus on themes around a particular topic. Notice that these are basic features of academic writing. The various stages of writing, Pennebaker maintains, disclose different perspectives and ways in which an experience touched the life of an individual, allowing for the individual to gain agency over a particular situation and reorganize it the way that he or she desires. Though Pennebaker focuses on the development of a patients' past experiences, his work, in my opinion, supports Pavlenko and Lantolf's (2000) intent to establish the first-person narrative as a valid entry point into learners' language development and extends, as I see it, into Heritage Language Development as well.

Incorporating writing processes such as those involved in the writing of first-person narratives, journals and personal essays, as demonstrated by the literature presented here, responds to the need to incorporate the HL's voice, conceived here as his/her situated meaning, into the Discourse model of advanced literacy. I argue that this process brings in exterior Discourses that are much more appropriate in the HL classroom and that may lead the way into a more solid understanding of Heritage Language literacy. As Lo-Philip (2010) states, "we can view the acquisition of (Heritage Language) literacy as the development of voice through engagement and exposure to literacy practices and their accompanying Discourses" (p. 284).

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: CONSIDERATIONS IN (SPANISH) HERITAGE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

If we consider the concepts that are at play in this analysis of Spanish (or any other) Heritage Language development, we must illustrate how a portion of Gee's Discourse Theory could be conceived in relationship to the emergence of voice as a tool of (re)construction. The

following illustration might be helpful in conceiving a possible framework for HL language development:

Figure 1.3: *A possible framework for HL language development in advanced literacy*
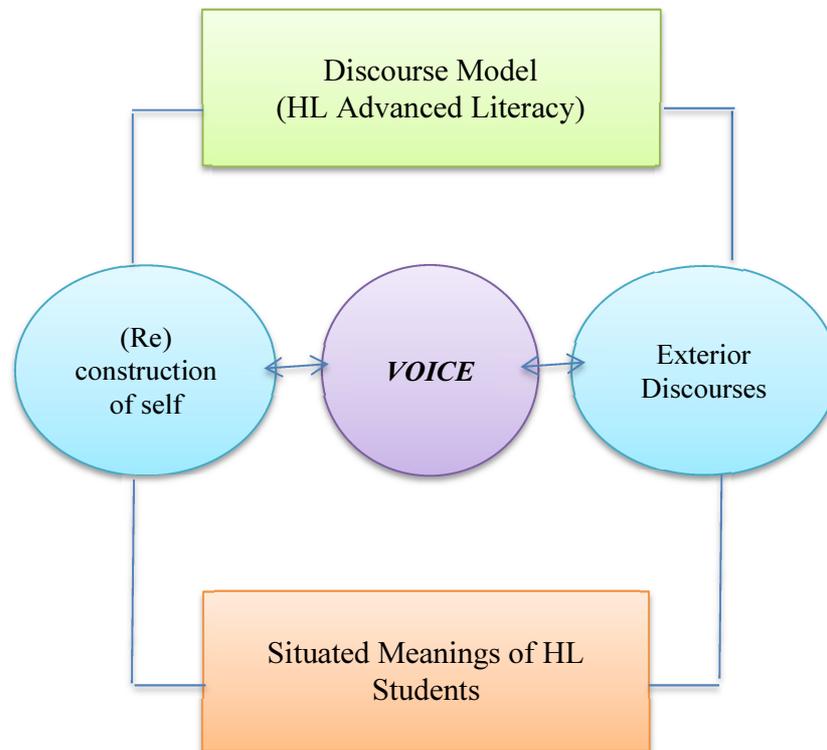
Ultimately, I suggest that by developing first-person narratives through personal essays that incorporate the student's voice as part of the Discourse model of HL literacy, students can make their situated meanings and exterior Discourses relevant, contributing much more efficiently to their advanced literacy skills than the traditional academic registers that are currently emphasized in HL curricula. It is my belief that through the consideration of these complexities involved in HL literacy development (such as the ones illustrated in figure 1.3) we may "stress the importance of creating contexts in schools that will enable students from diverse ethnic and class backgrounds to develop advanced literacy and consequently to be able to participate actively and fully in today's world" (Colombi & Schleppegrell, 2002, p. 8). The incorporation of students' situated meaning in the Discourse models of school enables a certain kind of participation that is often lacking, and my intention is to bring forth a new and much needed consideration of our students' voices as a crucial component in the development of the field.

I do not advocate simply allowing students to write unstructured journal entries and compiling these into personal essays. My intention echoes Colombi and Schleppegrell's (2002) cautionary note regarding implicit pedagogy in the development of voice: "just giving students opportunities to read and write about what they already know from their personal experience is not enough for the development of advanced levels of literacy" (p. 13). They state that "such an

implicit pedagogy puts at risk all those students whose socialization has not prepared them to relate to the embedded meanings; those students who have not had opportunities outside of school to engage in the kind of discussion and critique that prepares them for such tasks in school" (Colombi and Schleppegrell, 2002, p. 14). Indeed, the explicit pedagogy that is believed to be crucial in HL development (see Colombi & Potowski in the first section of this paper) continues to take center-stage in this analysis.

The possible framework of HL literacy development that I present here is conceived as a starting point for the development of specific academic tasks that may result in the type of literacy expected of all students alike; the type of literacy needed for true participation in and outside the academic setting. For example, one might envision the development of on-line magazines that compile students' personal essays as well as other off and on-line projects that compile and highlight the writer's voice[2]. Additionally, an instructor could organize the personal essay writing process so that students are able to connect the topics they explore in their own narratives to topics analyzed in readings completed in class, so that their own stories reflect that of well-known authors. A good example of how personal stories of particular individuals connect to larger topics which are relevant to the community-at-large is a storytelling project made by *Upworthy*, an on-line independent news website. In this project[3], three US Latino students were given a camera to document an average day in their lives. Throughout their storytelling, these students develop conversations around human rights, immigration, safety and other macro issues which go far beyond their personal lives. In the heritage language writing classroom, an instructor might envision a similar project, though perhaps instead of involving filming, it could be organized around storytelling through writing.

The consideration of these examples above is only a first step in envisioning a different type of pedagogy. A second step is for instructors to begin designing specific and explicit pedagogical tasks that scaffold the critical writing skills that our students must master while incorporating their personal narratives, following the theoretical framework presented here.

It is time we begin to devote time and energy into truly understanding the more complex reasons why we believe there needs to be a fundamental split between the study of Spanish as a Foreign Language and the study of Spanish a Heritage Language. It is not enough to simply create a common space where we incorporate topics common to students but where the complexity of their literacy development needs is ignored. In my view, we must use the voice in their stories to complement a process that will give HL students the tools they need so that they can be heard in school, but especially outside of school; a voice that can participate, (re)create and (re)transform itself through literacy.

NOTES

[1]I conceive here the personal essay as the culmination piece of a collection of systematic, structured journal-writing exercises on a recurring topic.

[2]To view samples of on-line projects that feature personal essays written by and for a variety of audiences (written in English) visit: "Denizen for Third Culture Kids" (http://www.denizenmag.com), "Major" (http://majormagazine.net), or "This I Believe: A Public Dialogue About Belief—One Essay at a Time" (http://thisibelieve.org).

[3]To access this project on *Upworthy,* go to http://www.upworthy.com/a-student-puts-herself-on-tape-admits-that-her-family-committed-a-crime-but-they-had-to-survive.

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