From the “Good Kids” to the “Worst”: Representations of English Language Learners Across Educational Settings

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Based on year-long ethnographic case studies following U.S. immigrants in their last year of secondary school and first year in a 2-year community college, this article contrasts prevalent institutional images of what it means to be an English language learner in these two educational settings. The article draws on the notion of representation, or archetypal images of learner identity, arguing that representation offers a means of understanding how seemingly self-evident and unchanging identities emerge in a particular social context out of ever-evolving processes of identity (re)creation. The article compares representations of ESL student identity in the two educational institutions and illustrates the manifestation of these representations in class curricula and spoken and written interactions. Prevalent institutional images of ESL student identities were appropriated and recreated by students and educators in one context and resisted by students in another. Contending that representation is an inevitable part of human meaning making and identity formation, the article suggests that images of students and of their backgrounds, experiences, and needs not only inform curriculum but also have significant consequences for students' identities and attitudes toward classroom learning.

As Nayar (1997) has pointed out, the generic label ESL has been applied to a wide variety of different populations, instructional goals, and student needs, and some of these populations are more researched than others. In the context of U.S. K–12 education, processes of English language learning are best documented in the elementary grade levels. In contrast, in spite of a growing body of recent research (see, e.g., Davidson, 1996; Faltis & Wolfe, 1999; Fu, 1995; Harklau, 1994; Lucas, 1997; Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990; Mace-Matluck, Alexander-Kasparik, & Queen, 1998), secondary-school-level immigrant and bilingual students may be “the most underrepresented, understudied group
of students in the United States” (Faltis, 1993, p. 2). Too little is known about how these English language learners take on the simultaneous challenges of managing high school content-area academics, learning a new language, and coming of age in U.S. society. Moreover, increasing numbers of immigrant ESL students educated in U.S. secondary schools are discovering that getting through high school is often inadequate in itself to secure a prosperous future in their adopted country. Rather, in a postindustrial economy in which three quarters of all jobs will require some postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991), students find that a major function of U.S. high schools is to serve as a prelude for and gateway into college.

Nonetheless, if ESL students at the secondary level are an under-researched population, work on their transition from high school into college is virtually nonexistent. There is a significant lack of communication and articulation between secondary and postsecondary institutions in the United States, and colleges are inconsistent in the data they collect and the policies they enact regarding ESL students who enter higher education by way of U.S. secondary schools (see, e.g., ESL Intersessional Project, 1997). U.S.-educated immigrants and bilingual students may not even be acknowledged as a special population, and many colleges appear to confound them with international students (Gray, Rolph, & Melamid, 1996). The difference between these populations is becoming abundantly clear to college ESL educators, however, as they work to tailor instruction to students with vastly different sorts of academic and life experience in the United States and abroad (see, e.g., Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999; Reid, 1997).

The lack of research on the growing population of adolescent and young adult ESL students in U.S. high schools and colleges provided the impetus for the study described in this article. Its initial purpose was to describe how one group of U.S. immigrant students negotiated the changing academic and linguistic demands of the transition from secondary to postsecondary education. As the study progressed, I found that the very same ESL students who had been considered “the good kids” in high school, the ones praised and admired by their teachers, subsequently came to be characterized as underachieving and difficult students in their college ESL classes. The institutional label ESOL student\(^1\) and the meanings given to it became an increasingly salient issue, and I found that the ways in which students’ identities were constructed in these two different educational institutions played a crucial role in students’ transition from high school to college.

\(^1\) I use ESOL to refer to English language teaching and learning throughout this article, in keeping with usage where the study took place.
The finding that learners' identities affected their experience in school is consistent with the work of other researchers, who have increasingly called on the construct of learner identity to understand classroom learning. Drawing variously from critical theory, social practice, and poststructuralist approaches, recent contributions have emphasized the role of sociocultural context in language teaching and learning (see, e.g., Angélil-Carter, 1997; Duff & Uchida, 1997; McKay & Wong, 1996; Norton, 1997; Peirce, 1995; Rampton, 1995; Thesen, 1997; Toohey, 1998). Much of this work has taken place in educational institutions, exploring how schools categorize and position students with identities; how classroom curricula, social organization, and interactions serve to reinforce or contest these categories; and how students accommodate, resist, and counter identities imposed on them (see, e.g., Thesen, 1997; Toohey, 1998).

Drawing on work in this vein, this article begins from the premise that identities are locally understood and constantly remade in social relationships. Thus, even though an identity label such as ESOL student may seem self-evident, its meanings are in fact constantly renegotiated and reshaped by particular educators and students working in specific classrooms, institutions, and societies. At the same time, even if sociocultural categories of culture and identity are viewed as intrinsically unstable and heterogeneous and therefore problematic (see, e.g., Atkinson, 1999), it is important to account for the ubiquity of such categories and how they come to appear so stable, homogeneous, and taken-for-granted in a given context. In this article, I highlight the role of representation in accounting for the dynamics through which vastly different images of English language learners' backgrounds and experiences come to be embodied in the same designation of ESOL student across educational institutions.

Representation refers here to the images, archetypes, or even stereotypes of identity with which students are labeled. I argue that representations result from constant attempts to hold a heterogeneous and ever-evolving social world still long enough to make sense of it. Whereas identities may be multiple, fragmentary, and subject to constant change, representations are temporary artifacts that serve to stabilize and homogenize images of identities. Because the processes that give rise to representations are largely out of conscious awareness, the tendency is to accept representations such as that of ESOL students as relatively unchanging and self-evident even though, as this article illustrates, they are in fact locally shaped and continually recreated.

Representation is employed here to explain the dynamics through which vastly different images of English language learners' backgrounds and experiences come to be embodied and applied to the very same individuals across educational institutions, and how such images are
constantly re-created and resisted at the institutional level through classroom interactions among teachers and students. Drawing on year-long ethnographic case studies of immigrant students' transitions from an urban U.S. secondary school to a community college ESOL program, I illustrate the interplay between student and teacher agency and wider societal representations of language and ethnicity in re-creating institutional representations in each setting. I show how the representation of what it meant to be an ESOL student in these particular students' high school facilitated favorable classroom conditions for learning, whereas the dominant representation of ESOL students in their subsequent community college experience led to increasing student resistance and inimical relationships with educators. I argue that the notion of representation lends useful insight in understanding how labels given to students in classrooms and institutions have consequences for students' classroom behavior and ultimately for students' motivation or investment (Peirce, 1995) in English and academic learning.

REPRESENTATION AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF ESOL STUDENT IDENTITY

Sociologists, anthropologists, and historians have long contended that classrooms and educational institutions play a prominent role in the identity formation of language minority students in immigrant-receiving countries such as the United States (see, e.g., Olneck, 1995). Likewise, researchers and theorists within L2 studies have suggested that prevalent images of immigrants and linguistic minority groups are conveyed in the curriculum in North American educational settings and that such images have significant effects on the intertwined processes of student identity formation and learning. For example, several scholars have posited that schools perpetuate prevalent societal images of immigrants and minority groups through a hidden curriculum of schooling (Auerbach, 1995; McGroarty, 1985; Tollefson, 1989). They contend that the hidden curriculum functions as a means of socializing immigrants to take on certain roles and positions in society (e.g., consumer, worker, tenant). Likewise, Cummins (1997) has suggested that the negotiation of identity among educators and students plays a central role in achievement. Cummins hypothesizes that the images of teachers' roles and students' identity manifested in classroom interactions often reflect oppressive power relations in the broader society, leading subordinated social groups to feel ambivalence and insecurity in regard to cultural identity. However, he also believes that these images can be altered in classroom interactions among educators and students that explicitly challenge power relations in the broader society.
The notion that dominant societal images of students' identities are not simply mirrored in classroom processes is echoed by other researchers, who cast classroom practices and social structure as mutually constitutive in shaping students' identity and achievement. For example, in a study of ESOL students' experiences in mainstream elementary classrooms, Toohey (1998) shows how school and classroom organization and interaction served to socialize immigrant children into the prevalent institutional and societal image of learners as individuals who independently negotiate classroom life and achievement. Toohey emphasizes that it is largely through classroom practices that are "so commonplace in classrooms as to be almost invisible" (p. 77) that prevalent societal assumptions about learner identity are communicated and re-created; for example, conventional classroom seating arrangements reinforce the notion that learning is an individual endeavor. Thus, Toohey (following Mehan, 1993) concludes that classroom practices both exhibit and generate social structures.

Recent poststructuralist perspectives on second language acquisition (SLA) have further amplified the reciprocity of social context and individual interactions in forging learners' identities. In particular, this work has emphasized the fluidity and instability of resulting identities. For example, several studies have documented the multiple, contradictory, and locally contingent nature of identity categories that are constructed by and for learners (see, e.g., Angéil-Carter, 1997; McKay & Wong, 1996; Peirce, 1995; Siegal, 1996). Another approach has employed learners’ experience as a means of critiquing identity categories themselves (Kubota, 1999; Leung, Harris, & Rampton, 1997; Rampton, 1995; Thesen, 1997), examining notions of identity prevalent in particular social contexts and exposing their socially constructed nature and homogenizing effects.

Less explored in this work is why notions of identity appear to be so stable, unitary, and self-evident in a given context in spite of their multiplicity and constant flux or why identity categories such as ESOL student remain omnipresent and seemingly indispensable even when regarded as problematic. This article builds on poststructuralist perspectives on SLA by proposing the concept of representation as a means of accounting for how apparently unchanging and homogeneous categories of institutional and societal identity emerge from the highly unstable, disjunct, and interactionally rendered processes of identity formation by English language learners. Although varying theoretical perspectives on the term exist (see Hall, 1997; hooks, 1992; Rattansi, 1995; Weedon, 1997, pp. 24–26), by representation here I mean seemingly static, commonsense categorical perceptions of identity prevalent in particular sociocultural, historical, and institutional settings. The notion of representation is rooted in the premise that human beings
make meaning through a process of sorting perception and experience into relational categories. Identities—one’s own and others’—in this view are relational categories that are embedded in and inextricable from the diffuse yet powerful influence of broader social forces, or discourses, in any given setting (Foucault, 1979). Discourses do not impose meaning deterministically or monolithically but rather direct and limit what may be seen as normal, commonsense, or appropriate (Fairclough, 1995). In this fashion, they exert influence on the categories through which individuals make sense of their social worlds and thus on how individual teachers and students construe the category of English language learner within particular institutions and classrooms.

Because they are constantly re-created and reshaped in particularistic processes of social interaction, identities such as ESOL student are relational categories that are always context specific, multiple, and in constant flux. Far from being self-evident, these identities embody myriad meanings depending on contextual factors, such as whether English is the socially dominant language (Nayar, 1997). It is through representation that teachers and students create images or archetypes of ESOL students that have the effect of fixing meaning, lending fleeting identities the sense of normalcy, common sense, and timelessness in a particular social setting. Representations are thus artifacts of meaning-making processes that are inherently retrospective—they look backward, attempting to capture ephemeral identities—and conservative—they attempt to homogenize and preserve identities that are always multiple and always changing (Rattansi, 1995). I argue that these sorts of archetypes or representations of ESOL learner identity inevitably exist in all institutional settings (and in all classrooms) in which students are educated. Prevalent institutional representations promote certain views of learner identity, making these views seem self-evident and unchanging—just the way ESOL students are—while limiting recognition of other views of students or of heterogeneity among them.

Power figures prominently in the exercise of representation because it can lend a greater sense of authority and sense of reality to some representations than to others. Because the teaching and learning of English take place amid asymmetric relations of power between teachers and students in the classroom and between majority and minority in the broader society, educators are more able than their students to impose their perspectives and viewpoints as commonsense. Thus, educators’ representations of ESOL student identity are more likely to be reflected and reproduced in broader institutional discourses than their students’ are. However, because individuals also have agency, the view of representation forwarded here suggests that institutional images of ESOL students are not simply handed down monolithically and deterministically; rather, students and educators constantly appropriate, reshape, and
contest and resist them even as they re-create them in the course of classroom interaction.

The notion of representation thus allows a means to account for the presence of seemingly stable social categories of identity in a manner that is neither a priori nor deterministic. In this article, I illustrate the dynamic process through which representations of learner status are re-created and resisted across two institutional settings and argue that predominant institutional representations of what an ESOL student is have direct and material consequences for learning paths. I show how such archetypes can be so implicitly assumed and normalized that their locally situated and socially constructed nature becomes evident only in crossing from one educational setting to another. Like Thesen (1997), I utilize the transition from secondary to postsecondary education as a means of illuminating identity in movement and the changing identity categories encountered when crossing institutional settings. By contrasting the classroom experiences of three immigrants in two U.S. educational contexts, one an urban secondary school and the other a community college, I show how the seemingly self-evident identities of ESOL students in each setting were in fact socially constructed and rendered static through a process of representation. Moreover, I describe the mutual roles of educators, students, and broader curricular, institutional, and societal forces in simultaneously re-creating and resisting prevalent representations of what it means to be an ESOL student. I show how representations have direct effects on classroom behavior and achievement in both settings, keeping students engaged in language and academic learning in high school and turning them away in the community college.

METHOD

This article is based on three year-long ethnographic case studies of language minority students. Initial fieldwork in the study took place at an ethnically diverse urban high school (approximately 60% Black, 30% White, and 10% Latino and Asian American students). Students participating in the study were enrolled in a science and technology magnet program at the school that was generally regarded as one of the district’s best and most competitive. Students receiving ESOL instruction represented 45 of the school’s approximately 950 students. Of these, students from Southeast Asia predominated, although some also came from Haiti.

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The study began with five case studies. One student eventually decided not to enroll in college. College data from a case study student who attended a different college are not included in this analysis.
Ukraine, Puerto Rico, Turkey, Taiwan, China, and Bosnia. The three participants (Aeyfer, Claudia, and Penny; see Table 1) were recruited from college-bound high school seniors identified by the ESOL teacher among her present and former students at the school.

This study adopts an ethnographic perspective (Green & Bloome, 1997), in which theories of culture and inquiry practices derived from anthropology inform case study methodology (regarding qualitative case study methodology, see Davis, 1995; Merriam, 1998). Qualitative case studies provide a particularly effective means of organizing inquiry into the experiences of learners who traverse multiple classroom settings with multiple instructors, such as the U.S. high school and college students described here. As is typical in qualitative case study research, three main sources—interviews, observation, and written documents—formed the basis of data collection and analysis (Merriam, 1998, p. 137).

Data Collection

Tape-recorded interviews 30-50 minutes long were conducted with each case study participant at the school at 2- to 4-week intervals in January-June, during the students’ senior year of high school. The interviews were loosely structured. At each interview, the students were asked to recount recent class activities and assignments in each of their classes. I prepared follow-up interview questions as I reviewed classroom observations, teacher interviews, students’ work, and students’ comments in previous interviews.

Each of the students’ teachers was contacted by telephone or in person before the classroom observations and asked to comment specifically on the case study students’ performance in their classes and more generally on their experiences with ESOL students. Teachers also made time in their busy schedules to speak with me before or after observed classes or at lunchtime, and these interviews ranged from 10 to 50 minutes in length. Before the student interviews began, I formally interviewed the students’ ESOL teacher twice for over an hour regarding the case study students and language minority students’ experience at the school, and these interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. I also kept in contact with the teachers informally as the semester progressed to talk about the students and emerging data themes. In addition, two 50-minute interviews were conducted with the students’ two English teachers, one jointly and another separately. In addition to their classroom teachers, the school’s writing resource teacher and

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3 All names are pseudonyms.
Claudia and Aeyfer’s counselor were interviewed. I also met with various students and faculty on a few occasions in 1995 and 1996.

Each student’s classes were observed throughout 2 full school days, and field notes were recorded. In all I spent 10 full school days at the school during the spring semester of the students’ senior year in high school. In addition, I spent over 30 class periods in interviews and on a number of other less formal occasions visited with students at the school during breakfast, returned schoolwork, made interview appointments, or checked in on teachers and administrators. Other informal contact with teachers took place in the teacher’s lounge, where I spent time between interviews.

Written documents are a crucial data source in advanced levels of the U.S. educational system, in which reading and writing are tightly integrated into classroom communication and language use (Alvermann & Moore, 1996). Accordingly, completed schoolwork (some of which predated the interviews), including class handouts, essays, tests, note packets, and assigned readings, were solicited at every student interview and again after final examinations concluded. These materials were photocopied and returned to students. Textbook chapters corresponding to material covered on the days students were observed were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Aeyfer</th>
<th>Claudia</th>
<th>Penny</th>
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<tr>
<td>Home language</td>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Cantonese, Vietnamese</td>
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<td>Years in U.S.</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>High school courses</td>
<td>English 12, General Physics, Sequential Math 2A, Computer Applications</td>
<td>English 12, French I, Economics, General Physics, Sequential Math III, Computer Graphics</td>
<td>English 12, General Physics, Pre-Calculus I, Computer Applications, Economics</td>
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<td>College courses</td>
<td>ESOL 213 Reading and Vocabulary, ESOL 203 Writing, Travel and Tourism 101, TVL 213 Domestic Ticketing</td>
<td>ESOL 103 Reading and Vocabulary, ESOL 104 Writing and Grammar, Sociology, College Algebra, Community First Aid and Safety/ CPR for the Professional Rescuer</td>
<td>ESOL 184 Grammar, ESOL 103 Reading and Vocabulary, ESOL 101 Writing, Sociology 101</td>
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Claudia and Aeyfer’s counselor were interviewed. I also met with various students and faculty on a few occasions in 1995 and 1996.
photocopied. The ESOL teacher also provided portfolios of students' written work across the curriculum collected over the course of middle school and high school.

Although all three of the case study students eventually hoped to earn 4-year baccalaureate degrees, they decided to enter a community college in the vicinity in order to gain vocational credentials in dental hygiene (Claudia, Penny) and travel and tourism (Aeyfer) while earning associate degrees. The college was a state-sponsored institution offering 2-year degree programs. It was a modern facility of 12 interconnected buildings surrounded by vast commuter parking lots. With an enrollment of approximately 13,700, it featured a growing ESOL program serving 250 students from over 30 countries, with recent Southeast Asian and Eastern European immigrants predominant. Data collection at the college paralleled that in high school. In all, the data reflect over 50 formal interview sessions with students and instructors as well as over 25 other informal interviews with students' instructors, 10 days of high school classroom observations and over 50 hours of community college classroom observations, and over 5,000 pages of written materials collected from students and from the study sites over the course of the year in which the study took place.

Data Analysis

As is typical in qualitative research and particularly ethnographic approaches (see, e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), the data were analyzed inductively and recursively throughout the project. Initial data analysis through coding and analytic memoing served to generate further questions to be explored and to identify emergent thematic elements. Data across cases and sources were subjected to triangulation in search of confirming, disconfirming, and altering initial themes. In interviews with the students at the conclusion of the study, I verified findings with them. The students also received all manuscripts resulting from the study.

In keeping with the theoretical framework utilized here, I note that the description here, like all ethnographic descriptions, is itself an interpretation or representation (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999; Van Maanen, 1995). Given the paucity of work on the student's perspective in L2 research (Leki, in press; Rampton, 1995; Thesen, 1997), I set out to represent this perspective. Had I chosen to focus on teachers' perceptions, this account would no doubt be considerably different. Nevertheless, although the interpretive lens attempted to privilege students' views, this account has come to focus on institutional and educators' perspectives in interaction with those of their students, or what Thesen (1997)
has termed "the tensions between the labelers and the labeled" (p. 488). In addition, like any researcher, I am a positioned subject who is "prepared to know certain things and not others" (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 8), and I am inexorably subject to the very social and institutional forces that I interpret here.

HIGH SCHOOL: "THE KIDS WITH DETERMINATION"

Students at the case study students' high school had elected to participate in its particularly rigorous academic program (including 4 years each of math, science, and computer programming courses). Thus, language minority students at the school were probably a somewhat select group, possessing higher-than-average degrees of ability and motivation. Their small number at the school as well as the single ESOL teacher's high profile as a student mentor and advocate seemed to contribute to a pan-ethnic category of ESOL student identity in spite of considerable heterogeneity in ethnicity and in socioeconomic and educational background. Immigrant students at the school seemed to be viewed primarily as affiliated with and the responsibility of the ESOL program and teacher. For example, the ESOL teacher reported that she was routinely called in by other teachers, counselors, and administrators to deal with any issues arising about language minority students at the school whether they were in ESOL or not. As she put it, "If it's a fight, a pregnancy, or an award, they just come and get me" (I, February 10, 1993). During observations, a chemistry teacher inquired about an absent student by asking the ESOL teacher, "Where's your Cambodian today?" (FN, January 26, 1994). A sense that ESOL students were regarded as and regarded themselves as a group was also borne out by the school's Bilingual Club. The club was an extracurricular organization consisting mostly of language minority students at the school who organized presentations and field trips together. Additionally, for a number of reasons, including the tracking system, the logistics of ESOL class scheduling, and the ESOL teacher's hand-scheduling of some students into classes where teachers were most likely to be sympathetic towards nonnative speakers of English, Aeyfer, Claudia, and Penny had attended the same schools and many of the same classes together since they had arrived in the United States.

I thank Carol Chapelle for this insight.

Coding conventions are as follows: I = interview; FN = field notes; D = document. Extracts from documents are identified by subject (e.g., English, physics).

FROM THE "GOOD KIDS" TO THE "WORST"
Even though they might have been distinguished at the high school by their affiliation with the ESOL teacher and program, the case study students spent the vast majority of their high school careers in mainstream content-area courses alongside native speakers. In fact, two of the three students (Claudia and Aeyfer) were not enrolled in ESOL at all in their senior year. None of the three had spent more than one of their six class periods per day in ESOL for several years. Thus most of these students’ classroom interactions and identity construction in high school derived from participation in mainstream classrooms. Several layers of representations of ESOL status in these classrooms were apparent in classroom observations, written communication, and interviews with teachers and case study students.

“An Inspiration for Everyone”

A prevailing institutional representation seemed to draw on broader U.S. societal “Ellis Island” images of immigrants leaving their homes, enduring financial and emotional hardships, and through sheer perseverance succeeding in building a better life for themselves in America. In the context of the high school, these images informed a representation of ESOL students as hardworking, highly motivated students who had triumphed over adversity. The strongest expression of this sentiment came from Claudia and Aeyfer’s English teacher. In interviews, he observed, “These students have such determination. It’s incredible.” He said that he admired ESOL students, asserting that “they’re an inspiration for EVERYONE, they really are.” “They just perform well. The drive and desire, I mean, it’s just unbelievable” (I, March 29, 1994). Although this teacher’s opinion was perhaps the most emphatic, most of the students’ teachers commented favorably on ESOL students’ motivation and school performance as a whole. Clearly, many of the students had experienced hardship and did work hard. But even though the representation of immigrants as determined, hardworking, and even inspirational students may have seemed like just a commonsense social observation to students and teachers, there was considerable evidence that students and teachers collaboratively regenerated and perpetuated this representation of identity, primarily through the relating of personal stories and through their classroom comportment.

Personal Stories

In classrooms such as English, where journals and essays were common practices, students and teachers seemed to make occasions for the telling and retelling of personal stories about the difficulties students
had faced and overcome as immigrants to the United States. Aeyfer's English class, for example, featured a pictorial autobiography project. The cover of Aeyfer's autobiography featured the potent image of her sitting between two flags, one Turkish and one U.S. In her narrative, Aeyfer related that she was forced to leave school and begin a job as an apprentice hairdresser in her last year in Turkey. She wrote that she prayed to Allah to send her to school, a dream that she could only attain because her family came to America (D, English, March 15, 1994). Aeyfer's autobiography drew an outpouring of sympathy, support, and admiration from her teacher. His comments in the margins included "Wonderful," "I'm proud of you," "Your writing is very perceptive," and "You do very well. You are a smart young lady." In an interview her teacher commented on how much her story had moved him, marveling that because "she wasn't able to go to school," "her DREAM was to go to school" (I, March 29, 1994). In an interview discussing this project, Aeyfer both proudly and sheepishly noted, "I guess he was reading it to classes!" (I, April 11, 1994) and said that her autobiography had inspired a question on the midterm asking students whether they felt that they valued school or took it for granted. Aeyfer was complimented by the attention she received: "I was like, 'This is my thing!' . . . I felt good" (I, April 11, 1994). As Cummins (1997) has observed, teachers' and students' roles are mutually constituted, and in this example mutually ennobling representations of teacher and ESOL student identity are perpetuated through a cooperative process, with educators implicitly represented in student text as fulfillers of immigrant dreams and ambitions and the student cast in turn by her teacher as a model of how to overcome hardship and obstacles to succeed.

This example would be unremarkable if it were an isolated instance. However, although more prosaic writing did appear in the case study students' compositions (e.g., Penny's discussion of her favorite movie [D, English, September 9, 1993]; Claudia's story about what happened when she came home with a bad grade in math [D, English, April 29, 1994]), many of the students' writing assignments seemed to be oriented toward particular genres of personal writing—autobiographies, leave-taking stories, stories about hardships they had endured as immigrants, and essays about customs and holidays in their countries of origin. This sort of writing by ESOL students appears to be widespread. For example, Fu (1995) reports very similar genres of personal writing in her study of immigrant high school students. As Fu amply documents, the representation of ESOL student identity appropriated from broader societal images of immigrants and manifested in these stories and essays has undoubted benefits. Students in this study found these sorts of writing assignments highly motivating for the most part. The assignments provided links between school and personal experience and encouraged
the students to take pride in their unique status as immigrants. They provided the students with opportunities to express heartfelt feelings and thoughts and to cast themselves and their experiences in a positive light for their teacher audience. In many ways, then, these assignments were emotionally positive experiences for students, helped cement social relationships with teachers, and at the same time acted to reinforce the representation of ESOL student identity already prevalent in the school.

However, the origins and motivations of students’ production of tales of immigrant hardship and success were complex and more than a simple matter of self-expression and self- (and teacher) affirmation. Such stories were enmeshed in issues of personal disclosure and student-teacher power relationships. For example, although the sentiments expressed in Aeyfer’s autobiography may have been genuine, at the same time her teacher was perhaps unaware that Aeyfer had been asked to produce virtually the same narrative by at least two previous teachers and had probably received similar reactions (D, ESL, 1992; I, January 19, 1995). In fact, the power of such narratives to arouse sympathy and admiration created significant incentives for students to disclose such narratives even when not explicitly solicited by teachers. For example, in response to the fairly broad and open-ended essay prompt, “Give an account of an event that actually happened or that you imagined,” Claudia told the story of how she had been singled out for harassment by U.S.-born peers as a newcomer in elementary school (D, English, November 9, 1993).

These stories carry at least the potential for students to essentialize themselves as a cultural “other” in order to secure teachers’ sympathy and support. Leki (1995), for example, relates the story of a Taiwanese student attending a U.S. university who incorporated her identity as an outsider in virtually every academic writing assignment she was given, commenting, “I am Chinese. I take advantage.” Significantly, the school’s ESOL teacher was the only one at the high school who regularly and explicitly discussed with me factors in ESOL students’ background besides immigrant status, such as class, gender, and family circumstances. She was also the only teacher who articulated concern about the perils of overgeneralizing about individuals based on their backgrounds, noting that “each time you think you sort of have a profile of what the family situation probably is based on a few indicators, I find out that it’s—I really can’t make that assumption” (I, March 29, 1994). Thus, although immigrant narratives seemed to contribute for the most part to a favorable representation of ESOL students at the school, the representation by its very nature also tended to essentialize and homogenize student identity within the institution.
A second major means through which ESOL students collaborated in their teachers' construction of them as persevering, model students was classroom behavior. For example, Claudia and Penny attended class more regularly than U.S.-born peers, a seemingly trivial detail but one highly valued by the high school teachers. In senior classes, where teachers routinely reported absenteeism rates up to 50%, Penny missed only three school days all year, and she had had perfect attendance in her junior year. In observations, none of the three exhibited the cat-and-mouse or adversarial classroom behavior often seen in their U.S.-born adolescent peers. They were consistently diligent and attentive in the classroom. This is not to say that ESOL students viewed their teachers less critically than their peers did. Claudia, for example, was not hesitant to tell me what she thought about her economics class—“I hate that class! I HATE the teacher!” (I, February 8, 1994)—or to observe of another teacher, “He’s so WEIRD!” (I, March 28, 1994). Still, they tended not to demonstrate such attitudes overtly in classes. As Claudia put it, “I just sit there and listen” (I, February 8, 1994). The immigrant students in this study also seemed to be freer with displays of appreciation of and even affection for their teachers than the U.S.-born adolescents at the school did. For example, Penny ended a note to her ESOL teacher with, “One more thing I have to say to my sweet teacher—THANK YOU” (D, ESL, November 13, 1990).

The contrast between U.S.-born and immigrant students' behavior was rendered even more distinct when immigrants were placed in low-track classes, a frequent occurrence because of an inflexible statewide tracking system for high school students. ESOL students regularly reported days when only two of their classmates attended class or when those who attended were napping. When surrounded by U.S.-born peers half-jokingly referred to as “lunatics” and “parolees” by a teacher (I, June 21, 1994), immigrants found it relatively easy to appropriate the representation of the hardworking, diligent immigrant to portray themselves as exemplary students. One teacher enthusiastically reported, for example, “They’re showing up. They’re doing the best they can” (I, April 20, 1994). Another teacher noted favorably that Penny completed her work before her (frequently off-task) U.S.-born peers (FN, March 9, 1994). On-task behavior and perseverance had come to be an intrinsic part of the representation of immigrant students, and teachers expressed surprise when students did not conform to the representation. Penny’s English teacher, for example, related that her senior English class had become listless and that students often stared off into space the last few weeks of school. But she noted that she became truly alarmed when “She
[Penny] was getting that way, and I said, 'Oh no! Even my GOOD kid's bad now!'” (I, June 21, 1994).

“They Struggle”

The perseverance that was part of the prevailing institutional representation of immigrant students at the high school may have been regarded as admirable, but it was simultaneously construed as a possible indication of a lack of innate ability. Aeyfer’s counselor, for example, commented that she “has to work hard” and portrayed her as “sticking it out” in high school. Likewise, the same counselor commented that Claudia’s high grades came from “pure determination and lots of time” (I, June 16, 1994). Another teacher remarked of Aeyfer, “She struggled in high school” (I, April 19, 1994). Although educators may have seen immigrants’ effort and diligence in school as commendable, the same effort and diligence also led them to doubt students’ linguistic and academic capabilities. Some invoked a deficit model of bilingualism when discussing students’ academic performance. Situated in a predominantly monolingual society in which SLA research itself has tended to cast learner status as “fundamentally stigmatized” (Rampton, 1995, p. 292; Firth & Wagner, 1997) and in an educational context where English was the exclusive medium of instruction, it is unsurprising that some teachers cast these students’ ability to communicate in two languages not as a special talent or strength but rather as a disability, emphasizing what immigrant students could not do relative to monolingual, standard English speakers. One teacher, for example, commented, “It must be like somebody who’s very bright and has a stroke. And can’t express themselves” (I, June 21, 1994).

Nor did teacher and institutional representations of immigrants as model students necessarily imply a high estimation of their academic ability. Some teachers clearly held high opinions of the students’ academic potential. Claudia and Aeyfer’s English teacher, for example, consistently commented that ESOL students did not have any weaknesses and that he had no doubt that they were going to be very successful (I, March 29, 1994; April 20, 1994). However, like the college faculty Zamel (1995) surveyed, other educators at the high school seemed to conflate English proficiency with cognitive ability, questioning ESOL students’ intellects. Aeyfer’s math teacher observed that the motivation and discipline of ESOL students was usually quite high but that concepts sometimes “give them trouble” (FN, April 29, 1994). Likewise, another teacher commented, “They’ll be successful because they are very motivated, but I have no idea of what their natural ability is” (I, June 15, 1994). Speaking of one ESOL student’s performance on a
standardized state writing competency test, the same teacher asserted, "She had trouble—and it's not brain surgery...some of them have trouble just organizing. That is more of an analytic skill" (I, June 15, 1994). Perhaps because teachers viewed these perceived students' deficits sympathetically, the students seemed largely unaware that there was some question about their linguistic and academic abilities. For their part, the students spoke of their bilingualism matter-of-factly or as a talent. Aeyfer, for example, regarded her bilingualism as a significant asset in fulfilling her goal of making a career in the Turkish tourism industry (I, April 21, 1994). She also spoke proudly of her studies in Quranic Arabic literacy (I, October 19, 1994). Similarly, Penny reported that her family had gone to some lengths, including hiring private tutors, to ensure that she was literate in her native Chinese\(^6\) as well as in English (I, March 17, 1994).

Thus, in spite of considerable variation in curricula, experiences, orientation, and relationships among educators and immigrant students, there nonetheless seemed to be institutional consistencies in the representation of ESOL students' status at the high school. The prevailing representation of well-behaved, hardworking, persevering students at the school was shaped by and served to reinforce broader societal notions about the immigrant experience. It led to generally supportive and cordial relationships with teachers and positive evaluations of ESOL students' classroom performance even in the face of evidence to the contrary. For example, Aeyfer's physics teacher rated her "attitude" and "behavior" as excellent in his class (D, physics, November 2, 1993) even though he commented on a progress report that she needed to treat lab work more seriously, read assigned material, and do all assigned work; even though she had done poorly on a quiz and a test; and even though he rated her participation and organization as only satisfactory. The prevailing representation of immigrant students at the school was neither consistent nor unequivocally positive, however. It intrinsically held the potential to essentialize and even stereotype immigrant students at the school and, embedded in broader U.S. societal discourses, it cast students' bilingualism only as a deficit in English. Nevertheless, because the representation held many affirming elements for how they were viewed academically and socially at the school, students continually invoked and re-created it in the course of classroom interactions with their teachers. The representation of ESOL students as persevering through the hardships of immigration thus played a role in keeping students engaged in classroom learning, and in that sense it was

\(^6\) Although Penny's family was from Vietnam and Penny spoke Vietnamese, the family was ethnic Chinese and spoke Cantonese at home.
ultimately consequential for the ways in which ESOL students’ academic and linguistic learning took place in high school.

COLLEGE: “THE WORST OF AMERICAN STUDENTS’ HABITS”

Claudia, Penny, and Aeyfer enrolled at an urban community college the following fall. Through collegewide entrance placement tests, each was identified as a nonnative speaker of English. They were directed to the ESOL program, where they were further tested and placed in one of four levels of intensive reading-vocabulary, writing, and grammar classes. Each of the case study students was placed in low-intermediate- to advanced-level courses (see Table 1), and these ESOL courses dominated their schedules in their first semester in college. Although they were each allowed to take one to three introductory-level college courses (e.g., Introduction to Sociology, Travel and Tourism 101), their ESOL student label became the primary determinant of their program of study. Because ESOL classes had not formed a significant portion of their secondary school course work, the fact that the community college positioned the students first and foremost as in need of ESOL constituted a significant contrast from the way that they had been constructed in high school. This in itself was not unwelcome to them, however. Students initially expressed eagerness to begin their college careers with ESOL classes. Penny, for example, thought that ESOL would help her acclimate to college-level academic work (I, May 19, 1994). Aeyfer even asserted that taking ESOL was her main objective in college, saying, “I really need to get my English more. I don’t care about the other stuff. I care, but not as much” (I, May 18, 1994).

Each of the case study students’ classes included 1–3 students identified by teachers and students as long-term U.S. residents and U.S. high school graduates. The rest of the classes, typically 10–15 students, consisted mostly of recent adult immigrants who had received all of their previous secondary and postsecondary education abroad (I, program director, May 26, 1994). Even though faculty were clearly mindful of and concerned about the needs of the long-term resident U.S. high school graduates in their classes, the curriculum and teacher talk were in many ways still oriented to the majority of students in the program—newcomers to the United States who had been educated abroad. This orientation gave rise to particular institutional and programmatic representations of ESOL students that carried significant assumptions about students’ need for cultural orientation, about students’ cultural experiences and affiliations, about the origins of and appropriate instruction for students’ English language features, and about students’ cultural capital (Bourdieu,
1977) deriving from educational background and social class. Walking into college ESOL classes, the students in this study found themselves viewed in ways that not only were discontinuous with the predominant representation of their identity as ESOL students in high school but also seemed to cast their experiences with U.S. schooling and society in an unfavorable light.

"Acculturation to Life in America"

Because most of the community college students were new to the United States, the prevailing representation of ESOL student identity depicted students as in need of socialization into U.S. college norms and behavior as well as to life in U.S. society more broadly. The curriculum in ESOL classes reflected this image of students as cultural novices. For example, the goals of the ESOL program as written by one of the teachers for a collegewide presentation included not only instrumental academic and linguistic goals, such as "through language study [the program] opens the door to a college degree program" and "better communication," but also goals related to cultural orientation: "acculturation to life in America" and "personal growth" (FN, November 16, 1994). These goals in themselves are unremarkable—Nayar (1997), for example, notes that they are frequently the province of ESOL programs in immigrant-receiving countries. These goals, however, were diametrically opposed to the case study students' self-perceptions and expectations as seasoned school-goers and residents of the United States. When I asked Claudia about the goals, she commented of the latter two, "What does this got to do with the college, anyway? That's just my opinion" (I, December 8, 1994).

Perhaps because institutional and programmatic discourses constructed acculturation as a student need and a program responsibility, many of the ESOL instructors at the community college assumed a caregiver persona in the classroom. For example, they often policed students' behavior. The syllabus for Penny's ESOL writing course featured a lengthy section on students' classroom conduct, including “Class attendance is mandatory. Students should not schedule appointments during class hours . . . . A successful student is one who regularly completes his/her homework . . . . Eating, drinking or other distracting behavior will not be permitted” (D, writing, September 7, 1994). Some instructors prohibited students from wearing baseball caps or chewing gum in their classes. Aeyfer’s reading teacher shushed students when they spoke out of turn. The same instructor often fell into a caregiver or foreigner-talk register signaled by exaggerated intonation contours and frequent imperatives; for example, “That’s RIGHT. Ve:ery go:od”; “Put those eyes
down. Skim quickly. Got it?” or “Read it for us, Jerry” (FN, December 6, 1994; December 9, 1994).

Many newcomer students no doubt welcomed the explicit socialization and guidance provided by the ESOL instructors. However, the case study students contrasted their ESOL classes with the considerably enhanced autonomy and self-determination they experienced in regular college classrooms. They all noted that college instructors, unlike high school teachers, no longer monitored or policed their academic and classroom conduct. Either students did the work, or they failed. This ethos was reflected on syllabi, such as the one for Penny’s sociology course, which in contrast to the ESOL course syllabi made no mention of classroom behavior aside from one statement about mandatory attendance and participation (D, sociology, autumn 1994). Observations of these classrooms similarly recorded no comments by instructors about students’ conduct, in spite of the prevalence of eating, chewing gum, and wearing baseball caps. As long-term U.S. residents and citizens, the case study students became ambivalent about the ESL instruction, which appeared to question their ability to function autonomously in college or in the United States at the very same time in their lives when U.S. society conferred expectations of increased autonomy and recognition as high school graduates and adults.

Because the prevalent institutional representation of ESOL students and the behavior of many of the newcomers led ESOL instructors to expect compliance with and even gratitude for the social orientation they provided in classes, the independence of U.S.-educated students often struck teachers as lack of cooperation and rudeness. One teacher, for example, noted that the students she had problems with were always the ones who had gone to high school in the United States (I, November 16, 1994). Although the teachers varied in their views of the socialization needs of newcomers and long-term residents, the prevailing representation of ESOL students as newcomers and cultural novices led to significant similarities in socialization practices in ESOL classrooms and a corresponding similarity in long-term resident students’ resistance to them throughout the semester.

“Your Country”

As the high school classes had, and for much the same reasons, college ESOL classes elicited narratives about immigration from students’ personal experience. Claudia, for example, was asked to write an
“arrival story” as one of her first ESOL writing assignments (D, writing, September 8, 1994). As in high school, the elicitation of such stories tapped into broader U.S. beliefs about the nobility and pathos of immigration. In fact, Penny was even assigned a reading about Ellis Island (D, reading, November 17, 1994). And much as in high school, these stories were privileged over other, perhaps more mundane or universal aspects of their experience.

Unlike the situation in high school, however, long-term U.S. residents were surrounded by classmates whose formative life experiences and education had taken place outside the United States. The programmatic representation of ESOL students at the community college was also reinforced by an international student archetype, common in U.S. college-level ESOL materials and textbooks, that likewise assumed that ESOL students have grown to adulthood abroad. This representation overlooked the multiple cultural affiliations of long-term resident students. Instead, curricula and teacher talk in college ESOL courses tended to position students as outsiders through discourses presuming a mutually exclusive “United States” and “your country.” For example, students were frequently assigned to write about their country of origin on topics such as “my hometown,” “homeless people in your country,” “‘low’- or ‘high’-class foods in your country” (D, Penny, writing, November 1, 1994; reading, October 4 and December 8, 1994), “a holiday of your culture,” “my country—a great place to visit,” and “problems of students in my country” (D, Claudia, writing, September 8 and November 21, 1994; FN, November 17, 1994).

These assignments and the assumptions underlying them seemed unproblematic for students recently arrived in the United States. In fact, newcomers actively sought out occasions to talk about their countries in college ESOL classrooms. Long-term residents’ cultural experiences and affiliations, however, were by no means that simple. For one thing, their lives and cultural identities were situated in the multiethnic, urban U.S. social milieu in which they had grown to adulthood. Their ethnic affiliations were grounded at least as much in a culturally hybrid immigrant community as in their natal countries. Recollections of what the assignments assumed to be their countries were colored by a separation long in time and distance. For example, in response to the composition assignment “Return Home,” Penny wrote such a detached and speculative composition that her teacher was prompted to inquire, “Have you ever had this experience?” (D, writing, October 6, 1994). She wrote back, “I have left my country since 1987. I have lived in the United States for seven years. I believed my country changed a lot. I haven’t go back to country yet, but some of my cousins went back to visit and they told me somethings had changed” (D, writing, October 16, 1994).

The very assumption that Vietnam was still Penny’s home (or at least
her only home) was a dubious one. Penny, who had just become a U.S. citizen, reported that she had few relatives or friends left in Vietnam (I, December 2, 1994). Likewise, Claudia reported that when she visited Vietnam after 9 years in the United States, her Vietnamese relatives regarded her as an American, simultaneously a status symbol and somewhat distancing (I, September 28, 1994). As long-term U.S. residents who knew the ropes, the case study students also felt a separation from and perhaps a certain superiority to the newcomers in their classes. Penny seemed to pity newcomers, commenting that “the English is not really good,” and said that she had helped a newcomer classmate with a report because “he would be—like, appreciate it if we share, you know? So I do it with him” (I, November 16, 1994). Claudia told me flatly that she would not associate with newcomers from Vietnam in her classes, contending that newer Vietnamese immigrants were not as self-disciplined or hardworking (I, October 17, 1994).

If they were not pure cultural exemplars of those other places, neither did these students feel themselves to be wholly affiliated with the White, middle-class version of culture that they and their teachers referred to generically as “American.” They were neither or both depending on time and context, something that the dualistic representations of culture prevalent in their classes did not easily allow. For example, the students’ writing on topics comparing the United States with their natal country shows constant shifts in pronominal usage and cultural perspective. Penny wrote in a composition on shopping, “In my culture we go to the market to buy food every morning. Not like here, we shop once a week” (italics added; D, reading, October 4, 1994). Similarly, when Claudia was telling me about a visit to Vietnam, I was struck by her easy alteration between frames of reference, between “in my country” and “because we’re American,” affiliations and referents that shifted constantly as she discussed different settings and participants (I, September 28, 1994). The dualistic framing of most of the curricula and teacher talk in these classrooms simply could not account for such complexity.

Thus, the prevailing institutional representation of ESOL students as adult newcomers implicitly presumed pure exemplars of other cultures and languages, and in doing so, it led to the neglect or implicit devaluation of the hybridity and multiplicity of U.S. high school graduates’ ethnic affiliations in the college’s ESOL curriculum. One can see that these U.S. high school graduates might find the predominant representation of ESOL student identity alienating and even a bit insulting. Although these students had been able to draw on broader societal representations of the hardships and perseverance of immigrants in high school in order to construct favorable representations of themselves, in college they were in effect out-newcomered and out-othered by their classmates.

TESOL QUARTERLY
"You Are Starting to Do This on Instinct"

Students and the community college ESOL teachers soon found themselves in conflict because of the curriculum’s implicit representations of ESOL students as inexperienced users of English and related assumptions about the transient and erasable nature of nonnative speaker language features. This representation overlooked students’ considerable previous experiences, academically and otherwise, with English. For example, students were assigned to read a novel and subscribe to a newspaper on the assumption that they were not accustomed to extensive reading in English. However, after several years attending English-medium schools in an English-dominated society, U.S. high school graduates were quite comfortable reading in English. In fact, English was the only language in which Claudia was literate. The lack of recognition given to these students’ considerable experience with English language texts led to resistance in college ESOL classes. For example, while her teacher lectured the class on how to locate stories in sections of the newspaper, Penny could be seen flipping to her horoscope and local department store ads, a small but telling act of resistance as well as a more authentic act of newspaper reading than the class exercises (FN, November 8, 1994).

Grammar instruction in the college’s ESOL classes also presumed that students’ language features were simply the result of lack of experience with English. Although the students in the study had received some explicit grammar instruction in middle school and high school from ESOL and writing teachers, most of their language learning had taken place as part of their immersion in an English-medium schooling environment. As a result, they had a keen implicit understanding of English form and usage. When Claudia’s grammar teacher asked the class why a sentence was ungrammatical, Claudia simply replied, “It sounds stupid” (FN, November 17, 1994). However, because their understanding of English form and function was largely intuitive, they tended to perform poorly on exercises or tests that required them to identify and label parts of speech or be familiar with metalinguistic terminology (see Ferris, 1999; Reid, 1997). Unfortunately, the ESOL program’s placement tests and curricula tended to presume exactly those sorts of knowledge. Penny’s performance on the program’s diagnostic test—a commercially published, standardized multiple-choice, grammar-oriented measure designed for nonnative speakers of English—resulted in her placement in a low intermediate grammar class that began with a review of present tense verb usage. Given Penny’s 6 years in the United States, it is unsurprising that her teacher was soon noting that she should have been placed higher (I, October 31, 1994) and that Penny was complaining, “sometimes, it’s very boring, you
know?” (I, October 5, 1994). Likewise, Claudia’s grammar teacher once lectured the class, “You know, I think a lot of you are starting to do this on instinct. That’s good, but we shouldn’t get carried away” (I, November 15, 1994). The statement was telling in its presumptions that students were starting from rule-based instruction and only then applying it to productive use and that they were only beginning to develop intuitions about language use. In fact, Claudia, who had been in the United States for a decade, may have been learning rules for things that she had done “on instinct” for years.

In daily, subtle ways, the curriculum and teacher talk in college ESOL classrooms denied these immigrants ownership of English. A telling example comes from a teacher’s comment on a composition Penny wrote in response to a reading about an immigrant who does not want to speak his native language in class with friends. At the bottom, the teacher wrote, “How much time do you speak English compared to your language?” (D, reading, October 31, 1994). In a very real sense, English was just as much Penny’s language as Chinese or Vietnamese was. The representation of these ESOL students as novices in English in spite of their considerable accomplishments in the language led the immigrants to counter with classroom displays of self-assured expertise and boredom. In my classroom observations of Claudia’s grammar and writing class, for example, she unabashedly worked on her homework assignments as her teacher lectured, looking up ever so casually from the book from time to time to call out answers to his questions. On one occasion she answered and then loudly declared, “I learned that in seventh grade” (FN, November 15, 1994). She handed in one assignment with a flourish 5 minutes after it had been assigned, as if to say, “See how easy these are for me?” (FN, November 17, 1994). Claudia also made it clear to her teacher that she regarded language assignments as busy work, doing the minimum necessary to complete them. For example, on an exercise about clause connectors, she used since for every sentence. Because the teacher did not specify which connectors to use, she technically fulfilled the assignment requirements. Nevertheless, she drew her teacher’s ire and a C on the assignment (FN, November 17, 1994).

“She Knows What the Teacher Wants”

Many newcomers in the college program arrived as “privileged” students (Vandrick, 1995) with significant amounts of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977)—relatively privileged social status and educational backgrounds—in their native countries. Moreover, both teachers and students regarded the educations these students had received abroad as having been more rigorous than the educations received by U.S. high
school graduates. As Aeyfer observed, "When you are, like, in the fifth grade [in Turkey], you know the [U.S.] high school math. The highest, the regent one. When you are in the high school, you know the COLLEGE stuff" (I, May 18, 1994). The socioeconomic and educational background of these internationally educated students had become normative in the representation of ESOL students within the institution, much as it has in U.S. college-level TESOL research and pedagogy.

As a result, even though the community college was itself part of the U.S. educational system, U.S. schooling and the immigrants who were products of it were stigmatized and seen as comparatively lacking. Two instructors asserted, for example, that immigrants were lacking in cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP; see Cummins, 1981) as a result of their U.S. high school education (I, October 26, 1994; FN, November 16, 1994). Claudia and Penny’s reading teacher asserted that U.S. high school graduates seemed to assimilate the worst from U.S. high schools. She felt that teachers had to provide “structure” to such students, implying a relative lack of motivation (I, November 10, 1994). Claudia’s composition teacher lamented that a group of Vietnamese American male students would pass the course “because they’ve been here awhile, but that is a big part of their problem.” The teacher told me that he could not imagine teaching American students fresh out of high school, then paused as he realized, “But maybe I am” (I, November 17, 1994).

Although the college ESOL teachers acknowledged that their students behaved in much the same way as their U.S.-born peers did (in fact, as noted above, they often behaved better), teachers clearly disapproved of their behavior as well. Thus, ironically enough, teachers implicitly rejected the very Americanness of students’ educational backgrounds in favor of the class and educational backgrounds of students educated abroad. For their part, the case study students recognized and sometimes resented the favoritism shown toward newcomers in their classes. Aeyfer, in particular, voiced her frustration: “You know that girl? Who was talking mostly? . . . . She knows, you know, what she [the teacher] wants” (I, January 19, 1995). Aeyfer complained that such students dominated class discussions and the teacher’s attention. In fact, she reported several heated exchanges with her teacher on the issue of differential treatment of U.S. high school graduates over the semester (see Harklau, 1999, for elaboration).

Resistance

In many ways, then, the representation of ESOL students that immigrants encountered in the community college ESOL program did not
reflect their backgrounds and experience, and because of this mismatch
the students often found themselves cast as deficient. As a result,
resistance soon began surfacing in all the case study students and
escalated over the course of the semester. It was not that the students set
out to dislike ESOL classes or that they took pleasure in complaining. On
the contrary, they were often hesitant to say anything negative, making
noncommittal remarks such as “She’s ni:ice” (I, November 16, 1994)
when asked about their teachers or classes. Many forms of resistance
were subtle. Aeyfer made a point of declaring to her reading teacher that
she seldom read the assigned newspaper (FN, December 6, 1994), but
she told me later in an interview that she had read it frequently and
enjoyed it (I, January 19, 1995). During my observations, Penny spent
most of her writing and grammar classes listlessly fidgeting, kicking her
foot, and putting her head on her desk (FN, October 31, 1994;
November 2, 1994). Claudia and Aeyfer conspicuously forgot to bring
their books to classes (FN, November 10, 1994; December 6, 1994).

Other forms of resistance were manifest. Already in September,
Claudia had begun a refrain of “I just think this class is BORING” and “I
don’t want to take those class!” (I, September 28, 1994). She soon shared
that sentiment with her teachers, which surely won her no favors. In fact,
she joked, “That’s why I continue to take it [ESOL]!” (I, December 8,
1994). Similarly, Aeyfer’s teachers consistently remarked that although
she had begun the term with high motivation and had completed all of
her assignments, as the semester progressed her work had deteriorated,
and she had begun to miss class and assignments. One teacher com-
mented, “She doesn’t seem to have the spark and enthusiasm that she
did at the beginning” (I, December 6, 1994). From her perspective,
Aeyfer was trying to simply tolerate her classes until they ended. She
commented, “It’s hard! I keep quiet, you know? She [the teacher]
KNOWS I don’t like that class” (I, November 16, 1994). As the students
withdrew or made more overt demonstrations of resistance to the
received representations of their identities cast for them within college
ESOL classrooms, the students’ resistance—that is, their failure to
mirror the representation—in turn served for the teachers as increasing
confirmation of their original assessments of and previous experiences
with U.S. high school graduates as implicitly deficient.

It is easy to see why the community college’s ESOL teachers did not
welcome these comparatively ill-behaved and combative students in their
classes. The faculty clearly recognized that they had a problem with
disaffection and resistance among U.S. high school graduates. As skillful
and experienced instructors, they were concerned about long-term
residents’ performance in their program and sought out more effective
ways to teach them. However, many did not appear to recognize the
extent to which the very representations of English language learners in
their classroom talk and curricula were implicated in resistance. Some of the teachers, especially two who had been high school teachers themselves, were aware of how differently these students were viewed and treated in their program than they had been in high school. One, for example, acknowledged that students were “used to feeling successful” in high school (FN, May 6, 1995). However, instructors often seemed to believe that U.S. high school graduates’ resistance and acting out in their classrooms stemmed from intrinsic surliness or poor command of classroom etiquette rather than from the dissonance students experienced in the dominant institutional representation of their experience. Even when teachers appeared to recognize the interconnections of representation and resistance among immigrants in their classes, they faced a number of constraints on their ability to respond or make instructional adjustments, including a heavy workload, isolation within the college, and the need to balance among various student constituencies.

By the end of their first semester in ESOL classes, these students’ resistance to alienating representations of their identities had become complete rejection. Claudia had consulted with friends and had discovered the little-advertised fact that ESOL courses were not compulsory—that is, students could simply choose to bypass the sequence and register for first-year composition. Aeyfer had made the same discovery and also planned to bypass the program, commenting, “I think I need more ESOL classes . . . but I don’t want to go in there anymore.” She added “I got sick and tired of learning English” (I, January 19, 1995).

IMPLICATIONS

In the classroom language learning experiences of long-term U.S. residents across two institutional settings, significant differences emerge in how the seemingly self-evident term ESOL student is constructed and understood. Informed in part by broader U.S. societal discourses regarding the immigrant experience, the representation of ESOL students that held sway in the case study students’ high school was one of enduring emotional and material hardships in order to strive, through education, for a better life in the United States. Although the same perseverance that was seen as ennobling also cast doubt on immigrants’ linguistic and perhaps even innate cognitive abilities, the largely positive ways in which the representation depicted ESOL students academically and socially were significant enough to foster its continual reappropriation by students and educators at the high school.

On the other hand, ESOL student meant something considerably different in the students’ community college ESOL program. With a student body consisting mainly of new arrivals who brought with them
significant, often socially privileged educational and life experience outside the United States, and reinforcement from college ESOL textbooks and pedagogical literature favoring a similar archetype, the college's prevalent representation in many ways implicitly overlooked or devalued the resources and skills of U.S. high school graduates and cast them as deficient. Because the backgrounds and characteristics of the majority of students in the program in some ways matched the dominant representation and because of the asymmetric power relations between teachers and students in the classroom, the representation of the privileged newcomer prevailed, setting in motion ever-deepening cycles of resistance on the part of long-term resident students, teacher sanctions in the classroom, and the students' eventual rejection of college ESOL instruction. Thus, prevalent institutional and programmatic representations of what it means to be an ESOL student had material effects on students' motivation and classroom experiences in both settings, confirming the integral role that schools play in the intertwined processes of English language learning and academic achievement.

The workings of representation illustrated in this article provide one means of exploring seemingly stable and unitary identity categories in social contexts such as educational institutions within a poststructural framework positing identities to be inherently dynamic, contradictory, and partial. The study also lends support to Thesen's (1997) and Norton's (1997) observations regarding the productivity of learner transitions in revealing the socially constructed nature of identity categories. Similar to language minority students in British educational contexts as described by Leung et al. (1997) and by Rampton (1995), the learners described here did not fit neatly into prevailing images of ethnic and linguistic identity in U.S. society and educational institutions, particularly at the college level, where international students often remain the implicit archetype in research and curriculum planning. It is precisely these students' marginality in existing representations or labels of ethnolinguistic identity (e.g., L2 learner, language minority student) that makes their experiences compelling; in a sense, their characterization becomes a window into prevailing discourses of the institutions they enter. It is only in looking at the same individuals across institutional settings that the contextual particularity and homogenizing effects of representations of identity such as ESOL student are made clear. What appear to be commonsense or self-evident conceptualizations from within a classroom or program can be seen as prevailing institutional representations, forged in broader processes of social interaction and meaning making and manifested in educators' and students' perceptions, classroom talk, and curricula.

It would be easy to think of the representations of immigrant student
identity described here as the foibles of teachers other than ourselves or institutions other than our own (from which we are thankfully free), but to do so would miss the point. Because these representations are understood at the level of common sense, they are largely implicit and not easily open to examination. I do not believe that the educators I have depicted here were any less perceptive, compassionate, or skilled than educators elsewhere. Rather, they were subject to the same discourses and social and institutional forces that tended to position students in certain ways. From the theoretical perspective forwarded here, representation is inevitable. It is an artifact of the discursive processes through which teachers and students make sense of the social world, processes that operate at a level that is seemingly self-evident and taken for granted. Like the teachers and students in this study, we cannot operate outside of the meaning-making effects of discourses and our own social positioning. And although representations give the effect of fixing meaning, they are not deterministic and are subject to continual change and revision. Students’ and educators’ agency—the fact that we can and do take action as individuals—means that we are continually recreating and reshaping notions of identity in the course of classroom interaction.

Because institutional representations are arguably at the heart of how entering students are placed and evaluated in college language programs, they have significant educational implications. U.S. high school graduates from minority language backgrounds are placed variously in college intensive English programs, ESOL academic skills sequences, regular composition programs, basic writing sequences, or academic assistance sequences depending on the specific practices of the postsecondary institution they enter. Institutional representations of language minority students—how students’ non-English language backgrounds are construed by colleges and universities—affect the configuration of programs, placement measures and evaluation, and exit tests. This study lends support to Thesen’s (1997) call for greater institutional and educator awareness of how students’ identities are shaped by institutional labels. It also indicates a need to constantly reexamine how program configurations and placement measures are chosen, and what is taken for granted in those choices. This study also points out the need for TESOL educators to engage students in an explicit dialogue on how and why program and placement decisions are made. As the study concluded, such an effort was already underway in the community college ESOL program described here. Through ongoing discussions, the faculty had identified a need to explain the rationale for ESOL placement to long-term U.S. residents and citizens and to address students’ heterogeneity in background, experience, and outlook more explicitly in the classroom. Instructors had also begun working to
reorient their curriculum to better acknowledge and draw on the life experience and expertise brought by long-term U.S. residents and citizens into their classes.

This study dealt with particular students in particular contexts. Because “the contextual ground of education is always shifting” (Dyson, 1997, p. 179), the significance of case studies such as these lies not so much in specific prescriptions for practice as in their heuristic value—in the ongoing conversation they initiate regarding ESOL students’ identity formation in educational settings and in their capacity to help us as TESOL professionals “attend to the world a bit differently” (p. 179). Understanding the nature of these fundamental processes of cultural identity formation is vital in order to recognize that we are never entirely immune from nor entirely subject to the societal positionings of ourselves or our students, and that things we do in the classroom not only serve to teach language but also serve to shape our students’ attitudes toward schooling and their very sense of self.

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