

Taking Hold of Global Englishes: Intensive English Programs as Brokers of Transnational Literacy

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As editors of this special issue suggest, this moment in time is marked by the rapid and widespread movement of people, with writing becoming profoundly linked to the lives and infrastructures that govern transnational mobility. Institutional studies are valuable for exploring these intersections because formal institutions—such as schools, churches, and workplaces—are primary sites where literacy becomes localized at the intersection of lived experience and established ideology. While a great many educational institutions now take part in the complex network of global English language learning—public universities, K-12 schools, community colleges, and MOOCs—I ask what an institution expressly created to respond to and spur the transnational movement of English language learners, the Intensive English Programs (IEPs), can reveal about how literacy is taught and learned transnationally.

According to the Institute of International Education, an estimated 110,870 international students attended one of 500 American IEPs in 2012-2013. Those students were just some of the 800,600 international students who matriculated to US universities and colleges in 2012-2013. Clearly, a substantial number of young adults have transitioned through and encountered forms and norms of English enacted within IEPs. These types of institutes are integral stopovers within the transnational landscape of higher education, and they operate within transnational social fields of education as part of the “set[s] of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed” (Levitt and Schiller 286). As such, they serve as one in a series of institutional brokers wherein learners position themselves and are positioned in relation to versions of English literacy at both the global and the local levels.

A few select studies of transnational literacy have included telling examinations of writers moving through such formal institutions from this type of trans-institutional perspective (Duffy; Farr; Guerra; Lorimer Leonard; Rounsaville; Vieira). While each of these studies contributes to a growing understanding of how literacy is enacted in and transformed by institutions, none provides an exclusive or sustained focus on English language institutes as “regimes of literacy” (Blommaert) that feed the internationalization of higher education, which is of growing interest to those in composition studies. Christiane Donahue, for example, explores the significance of this growing

reality and suggests that “[t]o understand the question of internationalization for composition, we need to situate composition in the larger context of current internationalizing activities and discourses about these activities” (215). Further, Bruce Horner, Samantha NeCamp, and Christiane Donahue suggest casting a wider net around what contexts to include in the “linguistic terrain” (272) of writing studies research as a critical move in countering the English-only ideal in composition scholarship. Regarding student literacy, Terry Myers Zawacki and Anna Sophia Habib note that the increasing numbers of international students at US institutions of higher education requires consideration of “what new or different questions we in writing studies should be asking about where and how we can attend to students’ language development” (651).

Considering the exigencies mentioned above, in this paper I suggest that research into institutes at the periphery of US higher education, such as Intensive English Programs (IEPs), broadens the field’s linguistic terrain to situate US-based composition as one of many actors across the transnational landscape of higher education. Specifically, I examine how the transnational political economy of English literacy is negotiated discursively at one US-based IEP (Northwest IEP) through teacher and student talk. Drawing from a discourse analysis of teacher interviews and student inter-group conversation, I find that, in addition to the difficult and time-consuming tasks of language learning, students in my study were involved in and recipients of another, much less visible type of literacy management: the ongoing valuing and defining of each other’s prior literacy-related knowledge. Crucially, the discursive construction of students’ prior literacy positioned students’ Englishes as variously against one another as well as in contrast to an American English ideal. In this way, students’ relationships with literacy were constructed vis-à-vis their and other students’ prior access to global Englishes as well as against standardized English norms. Thus, Northwest IEP did more than situate students in relation to privileged English literacy. That institution also served as a broker for the shifting status and subsequent privileging of global Englishes. This dynamic gives insight into how multilingual and transnational spaces like Northwest IEP mediate the broader transnational political economy of English literacy through the local sparring of Englishes as *lingua franca*.

CAPTURING LITERACY TALK THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

This study draws from an institutional ethnography of an English Language Program located in a mid-sized, urban US city (Northwest IEP), and the study is informed by both institutional ethnography (Smith) and institutional case research methods (Grabill). In accordance with both Dorothy Smith’s and Jeffrey Grabill’s methods for conducting institutional research, I collected and studied curricular, administrative, and technical documents (current and archival), literacy history and discourse-based interviews with students, and institutional history and discourse-based interviews with teachers and administrators. Crucially, institutional ethnographies study social processes, not institutions or people themselves, and these ethnographies foreground texts (written and verbal) as active mediators that inform people’s everyday lives. Smith argues that institutional ethnography is motivated first by the desire to discover how the everyday, lived experiences of those

comprising an institution's daily life are given sense, value, and meaning as they are coordinated through webs of textual and social relations. In this way, institutional ethnographies resist "generaliz[ing] about the group of people interviewed, but [rather] find and describe *social processes* that have generalizing effects" (DeVault and McCoy 753, emphasis added). In my case, the aim of this project was to understand how internationally mobile student writers' literacies were localized across transnational educational contexts and to examine how these transitions impacted literacy and literacy development.

Importantly, my own past relationship to Northwest IEP informed my initial curiosity about how institute students, teachers, and administrators were enmeshed in international and national exigencies. As an ELL instructor at Northwest IEP during the days and months immediately following September 11, 2001, I observed the once bustling school's student enrollment decrease substantially as classes were cut, teachers were given reduced course loads, and the school struggled to adapt to the US State Department's newly stringent visa regulations for international students. Although I had left this school by 2006-2007, during those years enrollment again began to increase, and the school started its slow reversal of fortunes; this change was largely due to a partnership brokered between Northwest IEP and the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Higher Education as part of a broader educational exchange strategy between the United States and Saudi Arabia. This radical decline and acceleration in Northwest's student population indicated to me that this school, and IEPs more generally, could provide special insight into literacy's treatment and transformation at the intersection of local literacies and global influences.

The portion of my study presented in this article examines English literacy as it is discursively constructed in a local context in order to glimpse moments of transnational processes as they are grounded through student and teacher experiences. Following traditions of discourse analysis (Fairclough; Gee; Johnstone), I examine how everyday language-in-use helps constitute the social world of literacy at Northwest IEP. To do so, I look at how discourse categories—such as perceptions and values about prior knowledge—are constructed and enacted through teacher interview comments and students' interactional talk. Such an analysis is based on the assumption that "[w]e use language to convey a perspective on the nature of the distribution of social goods, that is, to build a perspective on social goods" (Gee 12).

Specifically, analysis of teacher talk identifies values within the interview data that index teachers' orientations toward student literacy. Analysis of interactional talk between students draws on conversation analysis and helps reveal how ownership over prior literacy-related knowledge is negotiated, constituted, and contested in interaction. All interviews first underwent basic transcription, in which talk was rendered in writing without concern for fine details. In coding these original transcriptions, processes of literacy valuation became prominent in both teacher and student talk; initial analysis of student-talk, in particular, showed students defining literacy's worth through dialogue. To look more closely into this preliminary finding of student talk, I used methods from conversational analysis to re-transcribe four separate segments of a focus group interview. Conversation analysis accounts for how social status (like the attribution of viable English literacy experience and skill) is made through discourse in a situated performance. Coding was governed

by the principle that: “conversational interaction may be thought of as a form of social organization through which the work of the constitutive institutions of societies gets done—institutions such as the economy, the polity, the family, socialization, etc.” (Schegloff 230). Working from this assumption, I assigned codes to “displayed evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk, as well as interactional footings and participant roles” (Bucholtz and Hall 594) as displayed through turn-taking, volume, overlapping talk, silences, laughter, repetition, and so on.

Discourse and conversation analysis reveal how speakers and writers both construct perspective through language as well as how they discursively create hierarchies, which become constituted as social facts. Ultimately, it is within this dialectical shifting discourse complex of both teacher talk and student-to-student conversational exchange that I explore how “‘distant’ literacies are ‘taken hold’ of in specific local ways” (Street 328) within the context of global migration.

TRANSNATIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMIES OF NORTHWEST IEP

Important global discourse contexts for understanding how versions of English literacy are contrasted and enacted at Northwest IEP include trends in national and international politics and the global English Language Teaching (ELT) industry. Positioned across the transnational landscape of higher education, IEPs are intimately bound to the shifting political economies that result from the interaction of these global processes.

IEPs were political entities from the start. The first intensive English school in the United States—the English Language Institute (ELI) at the University of Michigan—opened in 1941 through State Department and Rockefeller Foundation grants and was intended to teach English to Latin American students whose presence at US colleges and universities had increased due to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy of 1933 (Matsuda). The founding and evolution of the first IEP at the University of Michigan points to the important link among politics, economics, and trends in international student migration.

Current trends are no different and can be linked, in part, to a range of interlocking policy shifts that resulted from the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. Policies related to international student migration were impacted strongly by these attacks. While some migration policies were new to the post-9/11 era in international student travel, many were simply more exacting extensions of prior policy. SEVIS (Student and Exchange Visitor Information System), for instance, an online reporting system that tracks data on all nonimmigrant student visitors, began as a policy discussion after the 1993 World Trade Center Bombings but was accelerated after 9/11. The implementation of SEVIS became law as part of the USA PATRIOT Act (2001) and the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act (2002), with all institutions housing students or scholars on F, M, or J visas being required to comply as of January 30, 2003 (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement). US-based schools, and IEPs especially, saw a decline in international student matriculation during that 2003-2004 academic year; it’s possible that the difficult process of implementing SEVIS contributed to this downshift. Despite this overall slowdown,

however, student enrollment in IEPs seemed to stabilize by the 2005-2006 academic year, although enrollment of students from the Middle East remained low (Wennerstrom 103). In overall monetary resources, “US universities said they lost about \$40 million a year in tuition from Middle Eastern students after 9/11” (Knickmeyer).

Additionally, a crucial turn in IEP enrollment that matters for the story I tell is Saudi Arabia’s scholarship program, which was initiated through the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) in 2005. KASP came about due to an agreement between King Abdullah and President George Bush, and its implementation resulted in a dramatic increase in Saudi students in US higher education. The stated mission of the program is “[t]o prepare and qualify Saudi human resources in an effective manner so that they will be able to compete on an international level in the labor market and the different areas of scientific research, and thereby become an important source of supply of highly qualified individuals for Saudi universities as well as the government and private sectors” (qtd. in Taylor and Albasri 110). Included in the scholarship are students’ educational costs and funds for air travel, living expenses, and additional tutoring as needed (Taylor and Albasri). One stipulation for eligibility is that students pursue a course of study “chosen by the Saudi Arabian Government based on perceived need of the government and economy” (Taylor and Albasri 110). While KASP was an educational exchange, it was also a foreign policy agreement as Bush and Abdullah sought to reaffirm ties after 9/11 (Knickmeyer). Thus, Saudi Arabian student enrollment in IEPs began to increase as students won scholarships to attend American IEPs. According to the Institute of International Education, Saudi Arabian students moved from number 18 in 2004 to number 1 in 2013 in terms of the highest percentage of students attending an IEP. The 2012-2013 academic year saw 38,165 Saudi students enroll in a twelve-week language program, which was 30.3% of the overall number of students enrolled in a US-based IEP. Chinese students were the second largest group, making up 14.3% of total enrollment. Japanese students were the third most enrolled, with 8.9%. Prior to the increased enrollment of Saudi and Chinese students, IEPs served primarily Korean, Japanese, and Taiwanese students. These trends correspond to both historical and current student enrollment at Northwest IEP. According to Northwest IEP teachers, at the time of my study in 2013, nine out of ten students were from Saudi Arabia. The rest of the student body was comprised primarily of Japanese and Chinese students.

In addition to their imbrication in global political and economic processes, IEPs are also tied to the business of teaching English worldwide. This is especially true for IEPs that are monitored by the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA), a transnational entity that seeks to regulate English teaching by “promot[ing] excellence in the field of English language administration and teaching.” With this oversight, IEPs are more likely to align themselves with broader trends in TESOL best practices because participating schools are assessed via this criterion. In this way, IEPs are imbricated in the contemporary global context of English language and literacy education as they help constitute the diffused infrastructure that circulates English language and literacy norms worldwide (Pennycook; Phillipson).

Even though CEA regulates English teaching internationally, it would be a mistake to think it homogenizes the experience of English language learners. Studies that document the range of

influences across a variety of language learning contexts—factors as diverse as class size, workload, national educational policies, local ideology and attitudes towards literacy, and access to material and pedagogical resources—foreground how cross-contextual TESOL practices are both uniform as well as highly situational (Leki; Ruecker, Shapiro, Johnson, and Tardy). Specifically, national context often influences how English language exposure and acquisition is experienced at the local, classroom level. For example, although Japan (Sasaki), China (You), and Saudi Arabia (Faruk) all have infrastructures for and long histories with the systematic teaching of English, students' experiences with English literacy in each of these national contexts are culturally and historically specific (Manchón; Muchiri, Mulamba, Myers, and Ndoloi; Prendergast). Crucially, the history of how English was localized within each of these national contexts often resulted from a complex historical process of British and American imperial expansion and domination coupled with a community's local uptake of English (Canagarajah; You).

Not only do IEPs connect with English teaching worldwide through their recruitment efforts, their curriculum, and their linkages to the business of teaching English; they also serve students who bring their own versions of English, which tie to economic, educational, and political policies within those students' home countries. Both the schools and the students have English histories of their own that are deeply tied to the shifts, pushes, and pulls of migration patterns and migration policies as well as to the global business of teaching English. Certainly, the continual movement of so many diverse students through IEPs, as motivated by political and economic shifts, suggests a rich, complex, and contradictory site of literacy knowledge as prior context interacts with current practice.

ENACTING THE ECONOMIES OF TRANSNATIONAL ENGLISH LITERACY

How exactly do students experience these political, economic, institutional, and national forces? How do these transnational political economies impact students' literate lives? In the next two sections of this article, I begin to tackle these questions by examining how the teachers and students that I studied discursively constructed the meaning and value of prior literacy-related knowledge through talk about literacy. From this dual analysis, I suggest that the local construction of student prior knowledge mediates these broader trends and patterns in international student mobility. Importantly, the construction of student prior knowledge by different institutional actors reveals distinct aspects of the intersection of transnational political economies and students' literate lives. First, analysis of teacher talk pointed to how such transnationalized educational spaces converge—through teacher discourse—in ideological orientations toward student literacy that reference locally available and globally accrued discourses of a standardized English literacy. Second, conversation analysis of student talk revealed that prior experiences with global Englishes made available an additional set of literacy norms for student writers to negotiate and enact. The multiple discursive constructions of prior knowledge at Northwest IEP suggest that versions of English serve as powerful discourse terrain that come to mediate students' lived experiences with literacy.

Teacher talk

Teachers' prior encounters with student literacy, in concert with the standardized literacy criterion of Northwest IEP, help explain how the discursive construction of prior knowledge is mediated by the transnational political economy of English literacy. As I will discuss in more detail later, I evaluated teachers' indexical ordering of students' prior knowledge in reference to Northwest IEP's curriculum as well as across the diverse student body. Analysis revealed that historical trends in international student mobility helped shaped teacher assumptions about student preparedness. Prior to the dramatic increase in Northwest's Saudi student population, the majority of the students attending this institute were from Korea, Japan, and China. During interviews, veteran institute teachers talked often about having grown "used to" the learning styles, skills, and approaches to English literacy brought by the previous dominant student demographic. They also spoke about how the growth in Saudi students challenged them to reassess pedagogical strategies, which was often a slow process. What I suggest is that teachers' assumptions of what counted as strong literacy skills or proper literacy values developed, in part, through extended teacher-student interaction with a very particular study body. Teachers had developed habituated responses to student literacy, which coalesced as frames from which much student literacy was judged. Dramatic shifts in student demographics, like those that characterized Northwest IEP, put this dynamic into stark relief.

Teachers' construction of students' prior knowledge was also informed by Northwest IEP's literacy curriculum, which is part of a broader, global English language teaching sector. Thus, the values, purposes, and meanings discursively assigned by teachers to student writing at Northwest are tied to how English is taught internationally. Northwest currently adheres to the communicative language teaching method. Even though this model is not universal to all IEPs, it does represent a dominant trend in second language teaching (Ellis and Shintani). At Northwest IEP, curricular documents usefully explain this model as involving the following elements: "Teach in a variety of ways, contexts and tasks; Focus on teaching skills and strategies that students need to meet the course goals; Teach grammar in context as a micro skill (strand) for course outcomes, NOT as formulas to be memorized and repeated on worksheets or tests; Be aware of 'teachable' grammar moments that bring all aspects of language together holistically" (Northwest IEP Faculty Handbook). Meredith Jones, a veteran teacher, translated how the communicative model works in classroom practice:

Communicative, as I've always understood it, is of course you can give rules, you can explain, but it should always come within the context of some kind of an activity, a process activity or an authentic situation, maybe a role-play, definitely something active. Something within context because sometimes grammar as it's done in tests is not very authentic. What we go for is authentic use that can also be used in a testing situation.

[Students] are exposed in their text books to the more formulaic grammar, but it's always been really clear to me at [Northwest] that grammar of course is important, as is pronunciation, but what we're looking for is a natural, authentic use of it, not just something that's formulaic.

Students are taught grammar in the context of specific student learning outcomes based on a "skills-based syllabus," which develops content "based on specific skills needed to succeed in a university

or workplace setting” (Northwest IEP Curriculum). Unlike curricula that teach for specific situations—like calling a landlord, negotiating a bill over the phone, or talking to a friend about your vacation—“skills-based syllabi group linguistic competencies (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse) together into generalized types of behavior, such as listening to spoken language for the main idea, writing well-formed paragraphs, giving effective oral presentations, and so on” (Northwest IEP Curriculum).

As a discourse context, the literacy norms of Northwest IEP proffer value on certain skills, genres, and practices over others, which become sources of interpretation for how to construct student literacy. Some of the most influential approaches to literacy teaching are as follows: Often, grammar is linked to written forms through the assumption that specific grammar points are best realized within particular genres. Certain genres are privileged over others and represent the most suitable types of writing for a tiered curriculum, the end goal of which is to introduce students to writing in workplace and university settings. In the case of the upper level reading, writing, and grammar courses just described, cause and effect and argument are the dominant genres within this discursive order. In addition, the acquisition of oral and written languages are distinguished through the curricular structure (with speaking and listening often taught separately from reading and writing), and with some forms of grammar designated as better for spoken versus written expression. In cases of more advanced academic writing, literacy learning reflects an additive model wherein smaller units add up to form the whole. For example, when building an essay, students are encouraged to construct the larger assignment by piecing together constituent elements such as vocabulary, meta-discursive terms most fitting for the genre (as a result; because), and predetermined paragraph moves (introduction; cause paragraph; effect paragraph; conclusion). The effect here is that any holistic rhetorical meaning is built from distinguishable and isolatable linguistic and discourse features. A guiding principle across the curriculum is that language acquisition should be targeted toward future domains of activity like schools or workplaces.

Furthermore, teacher construction of students’ prior literacy knowledge often targeted the level of form, grammar, and sentence structure, which were in turn linked to the broader values about literacy just discussed. In the following interview comment by teacher Julie Morrow about Saudi Arabian student literacy, grammar errors, such as “run on sentences,” “capitalizing,” or “periods at the end of the thought” are typical writing difficulties that get linked to broader value-laden constructs such as “so verbal and so expressive” and lack of discipline when writing.

Morrow: The Saudis are so verbal and so expressive and want to put that on paper, but it results in a lot of just run on sentences and really no discipline in writing, or really feeling the need for discipline, or capitalizing at the beginning [...] or put a period at the end of a thought [...] Just to kind of reign in, and get the discipline of a sentence. I feel like I’m still at sentence level learning, and they want to write essays, and don’t realize essays are made up of good paragraphs, which are made up of good sentences.

I see the construction of student error in this comment as informed by the literacy standards of Northwest IEP. From my previous discussion of Northwest IEP’s curriculum, it is clear that grammar for speaking and grammar for writing are distinct. But, as Morrow notes, Saudi students’ writing is

like speaking; she draws on the limited and unorthodox use of periods and capitalization to suggest this. What is also noteworthy about this comment is the reference to how “essays are made up of good paragraphs, which are made up of good sentences.” This sentiment stresses an additive model of literacy learning in which writing expertise develops from vocabulary to sentences to paragraphs and is finally realized in the essay form. This movement mirrors assumptions about literacy that are seen in both the curricular structure—what should be learned as students advance in levels of instruction—as well as in how components of writing are defined and linked. This additive model again indexes the overall literacy ideology of the institute, which separates literacy and orality; connects writing with structure, discipline, and set systems; and associates speech with free-form expression.

Teacher Lisa Carroll’s comments help develop these points:

[Saudi students’] writing is like speaking. It’s long run on sentences that go on forever with lots of excessive pronouns, “this guy, he ... he does this ...” and “I talked to my mother, she ...” Like you would when you’re telling a story. Everything is in the present tense: “Yesterday, I went to the store and the guy tells me ...” Like we do when we’re telling a story ... We naturally tell a story in the present tense. In writing we typically don’t do that. If we’re writing something that happened in the past, then we write it using the past. I think their culture is so verbal. You’ll see a lot of signs of that in their writing.

To this teacher, persistent use of present tense, excessive pronouns, and run on sentences index a verbal culture because their writing acts are “like you would when you’re telling a story.” Additional comments by Carroll indicate what a verbal culture indexes: “It doesn’t seem like literacy is a very big part of their culture It seems like they don’t read novels. Maybe they don’t read a lot of storybooks to their kids. I don’t know, but that’s my feeling. They have this totally different culture about reading and writing.” This orientation to the written text shows Saudi students being positioned at the periphery of IEP’s literacy norms.

In this multilingual space, instructors at Northwest IEP teach students with varied prior experiences with English literacy, with some students bringing skills and practices that more closely adhere to the local curriculum. As Morrow intimated, “it’s a little difficult, because an Asian student and a Saudi student come with such different baggage. I feel like that is the big challenge, especially of a mixed classroom where you have the Asians who know how to write a sentence, who know grammar errors.” At times, at Northwest IEP, prior access to English literacy through a home country’s English language infrastructure, for example, has the potential to become a source for internal stratification between student groups in the present. Different perceptions of student preparation by teachers, as evidenced in “how to write a sentence” and “grammar errors,” distinguish between students (and countries and cultures) that are a “challenge” (Saudi students) and those that are a more “natural” fit (Japanese students) for the aims and mission of the particular institute. Teacher comments about Saudi and Japanese student literacy reveal how this institution’s local orientation toward students’ prior knowledge is constructed against standards of English literacy as expressed in the local curriculum as well as teachers’ own assumptions—acquired, I suggest, through historical trends in student enrollment.

In the analysis presented here, teachers attribute indexical meaning to students' prior knowledge vis-à-vis the standard language and literacy ideologies of Northwest IEP as well as the accumulated experiences they have gained through having taught students with certain literacy backgrounds. Importantly, constructing students' prior knowledge within this terrain accentuates the role that both global Englishes as well as standardized English play in the arbitration of literacy learners in such a multilingual space. As Jan Blommaert stresses, orders of indexicality "organise inequality via the attribution of different indexical meanings to language forms (e.g. by allocating 'inferior' value to the use of dialect varieties and 'superior' value to standard varieties in public speech)" (73). Particularly salient to how indexical meanings about literacy were organized at Northwest IEP—through teachers' enactments of students' prior knowledge—were current student demographics, current curricular practices and teachers' perceptions of student literacy in relation to those practices, and students' differential access to prior English literacy. Students' interactional talk about literacy, which I now discuss, unfolds at the nexus of these material and discursive factors.

Student interactional talk

Not only does the cultural and linguistic capital perceived as available through prior access to English learning inform how teachers compare and contrast students' prior knowledge, but these forms of capital are also enacted in student-to-student conversations. To illustrate and develop this point, I present a set of microanalyses from a focus group interview with four male students who represent Northwest IEP's typical cross-section of student country of origin: China, Japan, and Saudi Arabia. At Northwest IEP, these particular configurations of students bring with them histories of speaking and writing that have to function within Northwest IEP's own peculiar history, curriculum, and teacher population.

Initially, the overall aim of the focus group interview was to provide students with an environment in which they could respond to each other's experiences with learning English at Northwest IEP. My original research design did not include a focus group session, but through interviews with individual students as well as teachers, it became clear that the literacy knowledge of the specific configuration of students at Northwest IEP was important to the current cultural milieu. In particular, teachers' comments clearly indicated that students' prior knowledge impacted their interpretations of the literacy curriculum. My previous interviews with individual students indicated that their literacy learning was being impacted by students' own sense of their sociolinguistic positioning vis-à-vis English literacy as it was organized at Northwest IEP. Thus, the focus group interview was initially conceived of as an opportunity for students to discuss their attitudes, motivations, and values for learning English and English writing and how those intersected with their experiences at Northwest. I hypothesized that the group exchange would give a fuller and more complex vision of the literacy culture at Northwest IEP as students interacted with each other in conversation.

However, what this focus group revealed was something quite different. Rather than presenting a clear vision of Northwest IEP's writing culture, students used this opportunity to sanction or delegitimize their own and each other's prior writing-related knowledge. Specifically, the following exchange shows how these students attempted to attribute indexical meaning to fellow interview

participants' prior writing-related knowledge. The following analysis discusses students' attempts to assign meaning about the legitimacy, purity, and usefulness of prior knowledge. I focus on a series of conversational segments, all of which are pulled from a two-minute and fifty-two second stretch of conversation between Hiro (Japanese), Bo (Chinese), Aasif (Saudi Arabian), Hazim (Saudi Arabian), Ling (Chinese), and myself. Ling, my research assistant, facilitated this focus group interview. As I will show, each turn in conversation offers a slightly different orientation to the discursive construction of students' prior knowledge: all together, this exchange moves between power struggles and alliances, as students trended between opposition, ambivalence, and consensus.

Transcript 1: "English is most important subject"¹

1. Hiro: =hmmm (7.0)
2. English is most important subject
3. of exam to enter university=Japanese university
4. so a:h hmmm
5. every high school student ha::ve
6. English (word) book and grammar book in the:: like train or bus
7. Bo: I think similarly in China
8. Ling: How about in:: Saudi Arabia=
9. Aasif: [(shaking head) No::
10. °we do we don't have () the public transportation°
11. Ling: h h u h h huh hhah hah
12. Bo: h h u h h huh hhah hah
13. Hazim: h h u h h huh hhah hah
14. Hiro: h h u h h huh hhah hah
15. Bo: (you guys) are too rich
16. [°h h u h h huh hhah hah°
17. to use public transportation
18. Aasif: [bu::t bu::t bu::t °actually°
19. we (study) that in uni- in the school
20. uh middle and uh high school (3.)
21. °we we we::° (5.)
22. we have (.2)
23. ((looking to Hazim))
24. some studying in English
25. and actually our books are:: changing now::
26. to English
27. like ah Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics
28. they are changing to English
29. Bo: [°wow°
30. Ling: [°mmm°
31. Ling: the whole subject is taught in English?
32. Aasif: ye::ah but there is a few Arabic words
33. tends to be tends to be there
34. Bo: [°high school°
35. Aasif: but the numbers and signs
36. x and y and everything is in English now=
37. Bo: high school
38. Aasif: yeah high school and uh::=

39. Ling: middle school=
 40. Aasif: middle school yeah
 41. Bo: when did you start learning English
 42. Aasif: huh ((looks directly at Bo for the first time))
 43. Bo: when did you start learning English=
 44. Aasif: when did I start studying English
 45. Bo: Yeah
 46. Aasif: uh:: the primary school
 47. Bo: [mmm
 48. Aasif: sixth grade
 49. Bo: °uh-huh°
 50. Ling: °yeah°
 51. Aasif: [yeah I started A B C
 52. Ling: that's early right () middle school =
 53. Bo: °yeah° ((mumbling to himself))
 54. Ling: some of my students they start to learn English in Saudi Arabia↑ when they were like uh
 55. three years old
 56. Aasif: [°yeah°
 57. Bo: °mmm::°
 58. Ling: I was surprised=
 59. Hazim: =it's a private school
 60. Ling: private school
 61. Aasif: o:h
 62. Hazim: yeah yeah ()
 63. Bo: [three three year old
 64. private school
 65. Hazim: private school but in the public school
 I think

“English is most important subject” is a nearly three-minute exchange between Hiro, Bo, Ling, Aasif, and Hazim in response to my prompting question: What part of your previous experiences help in your studies of English at [Northwest IEP]? Hiro initiated this discussion by talking about the prominent role of English in Japanese high school education. Bo’s response to and agreement with Hiro’s point that all students have “English (word) book and grammar book in the:: like train or bus” (line 6) initiated the remaining contestation about prior knowledge while also bridging those two men’s prior experiences. Bo aligns his experience with Hiro when stating “I think similarly in China” (line 7), which prompts Ling to pose the same question to Hazim and Aasif, who have not yet joined in this line of talk. Of note is Aasif’s rejoinder. Rather than take up the topic of English education, he intimates that “we do we don’t have () the public transportation” (line 10). The whole group responds to this statement with laughter, which shores up the salience of that comment and supplies an opening for Bo’s thinly veiled slight that “(you guys) are too rich to use public transportation” (lines 15-17). Aasif attempts to take back control of this conversational turn by talking over the last word in Bo’s statement, but it takes him several seconds to gain his footing and offer a complete response. His struggle to refocus the conversation around educational backgrounds rather than economic resources is evidenced through his stammering; the quiet, almost hushed volume of his utterances; the length of pauses between utterances; and a vexed look directed at Hazim.

At this point in the conversation, the legitimacy of students' prior knowledge had been both acknowledged and elided. Bo's comments played an important role in this process as he first showed solidarity with Hiro's literacy history but then appeared uncooperative in helping Aasif elaborate his prior knowledge. In this way, we see an attribution of legitimacy and a strong refusal to claim any similarity with Aasif, and, by extension, Hazim. Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall have referred to this phenomenon as *adequation and distinction*, which is a relational process of building similarity and difference in conversation. These authors state that "adequation relies on the suppression of social distinctions that might disrupt a seamless representation of similarity, [while] distinction depends on the suppression of similarities that might undermine the construction of difference" (600). Thus, Bo positioned himself as sufficiently similar to Hiro while stressing a resonant difference between himself and Aasif, despite any similarities they might have—like both being English language learners. This dynamic of *adequation and distinction* shifted slightly as Aasif gained confidence in his description of English literacy education in Saudi Arabia; this confidence was indicated by the completeness of his thoughts, the shorter intervals between words, and his increased volume. At the end of Aasif's explanation, both Bo and Ling encouraged and acknowledged his brief description with their indications of interest and approval. This brief exchange ended with a conversational repair.

As the conversation continued, the ongoing struggle to provide indexical meaning to prior knowledge resumed and was manifested through patterns of interruption and the stressed repetition of words and phrases within the conversation. Both of these mechanisms indicated that the boundaries of who has ownership over the meaning-making trajectory of the conversation were being contested. For instance, a second interesting exchange between Aasif and Bo occurred after the initial power imbalance in the conversation seemed to have been restored. At that moment, the conversation revolved around the timing of when English is first introduced in the Saudi school system. Bo both interrupted (line 34) as well as finished Aasif's sentence (line 37) by re-stating "high school." What is interesting here is that Bo continued his line of questions even after Aasif and Ling had a brief exchange in which Ling aided Aasif in responding to Bo's repetition of "high school." This interlude did not influence the conversation's trajectory, and Bo continued to ask, but now much more pointedly, "when did you start learning English?" This direct question shed light on Bo's previous refrain of "high school," which I take to be a shorthand version of the longer question, "when did you start learning English?" Aasif finally acknowledged the question, which was indicated by his looking at Bo (for the first time in the whole conversation) and his own forceful repetition of Bo's question just before he responded by saying "the primary school" (line 46). I view this exchange as a contest over who has the right to authenticate Aasif's language learning experiences. Interruption in talk is considered a "violation of participants' rights and obligations in talk" (Coates 179); at the same time, Aasif's assertive repetition of Bo's question had the effect of re-establishing his authority over the telling of his own story.

Finally, the vacillation of authority over Aasif's prior knowledge was extended to a discussion of who might validate Saudi students' prior English experience more generally. I turn now to the last segment of this excerpt. The group responded to a statement by Ling that "some of my students

they start to learn English in Saudi Arabia: when they were like uh: three years old” (lines 54-55). This series of exchanges is interesting with regard to how Bo picked up on and repeated two ideas: that children as young as three learn English, and that this age group learns in private schools. While Bo’s repetition of these phrases could be interpreted as a clarifying move, the prior unfolding of this conversation suggested otherwise. A possible reading, given the context of this conversation, is an intratextual link to the earlier exchange about Saudi students being too rich to take public transportation. Even if Bo did not intend to make these links, the subsequent change in topic—the students beginning to joke about Hazim’s age and how long ago he must have learned English—indicates this was a moment of unease for the group.

The students’ discussions about prior knowledge ended at this point, although they returned to this topic at several other points throughout the focus group. In later conversations, the larger dynamic of how the value and ownership of prior knowledge gets negotiated in talk continued. In other words, this type of interaction was a pattern that animated other instances of students’ prior knowledge talk. During these conversational segments, the push and pull over who gets to authorize prior knowledge occurred through a series of turn-taking dynamics that revolved primarily around interruptions of talk, overlapping speech, or the filling in or repeating of words or phrases after a pause in conversation. While these are common mechanisms for either violating or aiding in all conversation, the prevalence of this type of conversational dynamic can be especially pronounced for beginning language learners as speakers search for appropriate vocabulary to represent their point. Despite the perhaps accidental, unconscious, or even pragmatic engagement in such turn-taking dynamics, the occasions of the turns nonetheless became sites where control over the conversation’s trajectory and meaning took place. As such, these were moments where power was managed and negotiated at the local level.

Ultimately, through talk, students “ascribed (and rejected), avowed (and disavowed), displayed (and ignored)” (Antaki and Widdicombe 2) claims about their own and each other’s prior knowledge. The fact that students were able to shift meaning about prior knowledge through micro turn-taking mechanisms such as interruption and overlapping talk indicates how prior knowledge was available as a discursive resource that students could use to leverage their own status as an English speaker in relation to other students. This analysis also indicates how, even if an institute proffers a stable value on student literacy, prior knowledge can still be an active site for students to vie for momentary agency over their place within the complex of global Englishes. Through such moments of construction and contestation, literacy value was informed by, but not reducible to, the political economies of international student mobility as they intersected with specific personal and institutional histories.

CONCLUSION

Scholars such as Paul Kei Matsuda understand IEPs as literacy brokers that mediate students’ access to privileged forms of standard English writing and speaking. In this way, IEPs act as containers of linguistic difference (Matsuda, “Myth”). While Northwest IEP did fill this role, I argue that this was only one in a shifting complex of brokering roles. On the one hand, through teachers’ discursive

construction of students' prior knowledge as indexed through curricular norms and shifting demographics, Northwest IEP brokered students' access to privileged forms of English writing and speaking. Significantly, as my discourse analysis of teacher and student talk revealed, Northwest IEP also brokered the construction and valuing of its international students' access to and right to access types of global Englishes. It is no accident that I found that *prior* knowledge was a site for such discursive brokering, as it is on this terrain that students and teachers are able to index the diverse materialities and experiences of a transnational English education.

Ultimately, recognizing IEPs as brokers of competing and shifting forms of literacy discourse, as seen in both teacher and student talk, challenges assumptions that students' primary or only literacy struggle when enrolled in such institutes is to learn the dominant skills, practices, and cultural imperatives of Western academic discourse, although these remain strict criterion against which students are judged. In addition to these standard-language ideals, students also participated in another distinctly transnational type of literacy management in which the value and status of their literacy was measured and ranked *vis-à-vis* other students' access to English as global lingua franca. Thus, for the students in my study, literacy—as constructed in both teacher and student talk—was framed through a kind of ongoing ambivalence in relation to English as lingua franca; through such talk, literacy shored up meaning temporarily, but that meaning-making required continuous discourse work—everyday work that was likely exacerbated by the sheer numbers and types of histories that moved through Northwest IEP.

NOTES

¹In this transcript, I have used a notational system developed by Gail Jefferson and based in Conversational Analysis. Here, pauses in speech that could indicate a possible completion of a turn are marked by line breaks. Pauses longer than half a second are measured in seconds and represented numerically, e.g., (.7). An underline indicates words spoken at a higher volume while degree signs represent lower volume speech, colons are used after vowels to indicate audible extensions, and difficult-to-decipher words are signaled with blank space inside parentheses. I have used a left square bracket to represent overlapping talk. Gestures and other body movements are placed inside double parentheses.

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