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## Hispanic Students' Voices in Writing

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HISPANIC STUDENTS' VOICES  
IN WRITING

A Thesis

by

REGINE PELLICER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Texas-Pan American  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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HISPANIC STUDENTS' VOICES  
IN WRITING

A Thesis  
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May 2010

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## ABSTRACT

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This study focuses on the voices expressed by Hispanic students enrolled in first-year composition classes at a Hispanic Serving Institution in South Texas. The present research highlights similarities with a study conducted in Tucson, Arizona among Hispanic households. Both studies emphasize the importance of women as active agents in the transmission of literacy practices and language ideologies, which also reflect the dilemma of families caught between tradition and modernity. Moreover, this study reveals that Hispanics tend to look for new frameworks for their lives in evangelical Christianity.

This work also focuses on students' dissonances regarding the use of oral code-switching in South Texas, where Tex-Mex is spoken. Furthermore, the researcher investigates the use of code-switching in English composition and highlights its use as a rhetorical device.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Exploring new paths**

In 2007, Peter Elbow proposed to “reawaken the discussion” on voice, an area commonly ignored in contemporary writing studies research. Indeed, in the 1960s and 1970s, scholars debated on the notion of voice, what it is, who has it, and whether it is an internal dimension or the product of a social environment (Elbow, 1973), but the debate lost its vigor during the nineties, as the concept was “successfully discredited in (...) journals and books” (Elbow, 2007, p. 170). As a scholar who spent a good deal of his career working on voice (1973, 1994, 1998), Elbow wondered “who can find a writer arguing for voice (...) in any enthusiastic, nonironic or noncritical sense (...) for the last ten or fifteen years?” (p. 170), and demonstrated that the debate over voice has not been settled and has unfortunately taken a sterile turn. One exception might be the research conducted by Hirvela and Belcher, who took a different approach on voice. Rejecting the idea that English as a Second Language learners (L2) “must be taught how to develop or acquire a voice” (Hirvela & Belcher, 2001, p. 84) when they enter American institutions, they decided to analyze writings produced by graduate students who had already been published in their home countries. The purpose of their study was to interpret the voices expressed by these students as they wrote in English. After a careful analysis of writing

samples and interviews with students, they stressed the instructor's role as an interpreter of students' voice. They specifically recommended that instructors reading L2 students' work, place a "greater emphasis on trying to locate the writerly person, the identities and self-representations, 'behind the words'" (2001, p. 105). Teachers need to be vigilant and to "unpack" the voices expressed by L2 learners in order to better understand their identity, their culture, their certainties and doubts as they enter the writing classroom. In other words, by better assessing their students' needs, instructors will be able to provide them with better guidance for adapting to American institutions.

This emphasis on teachers' role and L2 writers, attracted Elbow's attention, as he thinks that nowadays, two new phenomena could revive the discussion on voice: 1) the expansion of online forms of communication enabling different writing formats, all aimed however at revealing who the writer is (blogs, MySpace), 2) the development of nonmainstream versions of English (p. 171) since a growing number of international students attend American universities, especially at a graduate level.

As an international graduate student myself, I have to admit that "voice" was not a concept valued in France, where I studied and lived most of my life. When I took classes in the United States, I discovered this idea and the emphasis placed on it by middle school teachers, as it is a criterion in the grading system of the Texas state exam, the TAKS. As I was also a Teaching Assistant instructing first-year composition classes, I wondered what was voice, what voices my students expressed, and if I was able to identify them. These questions were of particular importance for me since I was feeling like an outsider and had to understand the world around me, both as a student and as an instructor. I was living in a foreign country and in a particular place: a border town in the

Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas, where more than 80% of the population is Hispanic ([www.txcip.org](http://www.txcip.org)). People in the Rio Grande Valley speak a non standard variety of English called Tex-Mex, which could be defined as English intermingled with Spanish.

Therefore, I decided to focus my study on Hispanic students in South Texas, as I think that it has relevance for writing instruction beyond the borderlands. Indeed, as the Hispanic population is rising in the United States, a growing number of students from Hispanic background are going to make their way to college classrooms. Also, as Rio Grande Valley residents speak a nonmainstream variety of English, it has relevance to the ongoing conversation on nonmainstream varieties of English as mentioned by Elbow.

### **The Rio Grande Valley**

This study takes place in the lower Rio Grande, an area also known as “The Valley” by its inhabitants. It is a strip of 4200 square miles of land that stretches along the southern tip of Texas (Maril, 1989, p.1), from the sunny beaches of South Padre Island to the East, to Roma in the West, and is about a hundred miles wide ([www.theriogrande.com](http://www.theriogrande.com)).

Historically, this area was populated by Mexicans, some of whom can trace their family trees back to Spain. After Texas joined the Union in 1845 and the signature of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, Anglos moved to South Texas and ruled an area where they were a numerical minority. However, the first inhabitants of the area, Mexican nationals who spoke Spanish, resisted the White presence in their own way, and “unlike other Spanish-speaking populations in America, Tejanos [Texas residents of Mexican descent] have existed as a culturally and linguistically distinct community within the dominant ‘Anglo’ culture for over 150 years” (Kells, 1995, p. 6). Because the

Tejano population lived in a “colonized status” (Kells, 1995, p. 6) under the White rule, the Spanish-speaking population remained on the margins of society and endured high poverty rates, as Tejanos were kept in menial jobs and agriculture. There were no industries in the area, farming (cattle breeding) and crops (cotton and citrus) were the two main sources of revenue for Tejano workers who constituted a cheap source of manpower.

When she conducted a study among basic writers in a South Texas college, Kells noticed that “social isolation from both the dominant Anglo culture of the U.S. and the Hispanoamerican culture centered in Mexico had resulted in a kind of linguistic insulation among South Texas Chicanos” (1995, p. 9). Indeed, South Texas inhabitants had developed a variety of English known as Tex-Mex, a term which refers to a variety of English that is not Standard American English (as its pronunciation is influenced by Spanish) and not exactly the Spanish used in Mexico (due to their isolation from Mexico, Tejanos had developed a new version of Spanish). Speakers of Tex-Mex who are bilingual, also tend to sprinkle their speech with Spanish words, or start a sentence in Spanish and finish it in English, in a custom that is known as code-switching.

In contemporary South Texas, there is a great deal of movement back and forth across the border. A few Anglos or foreigners live on the American side, but cross the border daily to hold high positions in maquiladoras (factories) in Mexico. On the other side, Mexican workers and visitors regularly cross the border for their work or a shopping spree. Other Mexican residents cross the border to attend school or college in the U.S., in order to get a better education that will make them more marketable in Mexico as well as in the States.

Because of this dynamic movement, a vast majority of the population living or working in the Valley is bilingual, at least to a certain extent. Some people primarily speak Spanish and little to no English, while others mainly speak English and are less fluent in Spanish, or not at all. It is very common to hear people on a college campus, at the stores, in the workplace, and on the radio code-switching when talking to one another. However, very few Valley residents see it as an advantage or a skill, and it is more common to hear them complaining that they are ostracized by people on both sides of the border: English speakers beyond the limits of the Valley, as well as Spanish speakers from Mexico.

For instance, customers from all over the country calling call centers in the Valley sometimes ask to speak to a native speaker of English, just because the customer service representative who answers the phone doesn't have a "native like" accent. When the listener hears a trace of Spanish accent, he assumes his interlocutor is a non-native speaker of English. Monolingual English speakers born in the Valley speak a variety of English that is influenced by Spanish semantic choices and phonology, which leads to ostracism from mainstream English speakers. Fought (2003) studied this phenomenon in California, and observed that "some people are not bilingual and still, they speak Chicano English" (p. 3), which throws light on Chicano English in California, or Tex-Mex in South Texas, as real dialects, and not dialects spoken by recent immigrants only.

On the other side of the border, Mexican residents don't see the Valley's Spanish dialect in a better way. They say that South Texans speak a spoiled variety of Spanish, often called "pocho". For them, the Spanish dialect spoken in the Valley is not as pure as the one spoken in Monterrey, a Mexican city about three hours away from the border.

Residents of the Rio Grande Valley are thought to use loan words (a car becomes *un caro*, instead of *auto*), and code-switching because they don't know enough Spanish to have a conversation in Spanish only.

### **The University of Texas- Pan American**

In order to better understand the Lower Rio Grande Valley, a look at the student enrollment statistics at the institution where this study was conducted are quite revealing. The University of Texas Pan-American (UTPA) is a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). It is second in the number of Hispanics enrolled in an American University, and the second in the number of bachelor's degrees awarded to Hispanic students in the United States (UTPA, 2008, p.2). As a matter of fact, Hispanics formed 87.9% of the undergraduate student body in 2008, and White Non-Hispanics occupied only 4.8% of the same student body. Asian and Black Non-Hispanic students respectively represented 1.2% and 0.7% of the students attending the university.

Another characteristic of UTPA is that 93.2% of its students come from the four counties forming the Rio Grande Valley (Hidalgo, Cameron, Star and Willacy Counties). Only 2.9% of students are identified as "Other Texas Residents" and 2.5% as Mexican Nationals (UTPA, 2008, p. 11). These figures are very different from the ones generally found in North American universities. Usually, White students form the majority of the student body, while African American students come second in terms of enrollment, and Hispanic students represent the third ethnic group enrolled in higher education institutions ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)). Even though proximity is always a factor in the choice of a four-year institution, it is very common in the United States to find students moving to another state to attend school. In the case of UTPA, these tendencies and data are quite

different due to the Valley's particular socio-cultural environment. Indeed, Hispanic students are attached to the Valley, a strip of land where their culture is appreciated and protected. Furthermore, Hispanics are traditionally family oriented and prefer staying close to their families in case of need, sometimes dropping out of college to earn more money (a large majority of students work while attending college), and help close relatives through a difficult situation (Méndez Newman, 2007, p. 22). Last, but not least, students are sometimes afraid of leaving the Valley to go to a place where they are going to be a minority (Ramírez-Dhoore & Jones, 2007, p. 71). A year ago, I read *Where do I go with Spanish?* (Hood, 2005) with my students, an article showing the financial advantages and opportunities Spanish speakers have on the job market in the U.S. I asked them if they would be ready to leave the Valley to get a good position where their knowledge of Spanish would be valued. Most of them replied that they would not feel comfortable living in a place where they would be a minority. They said they feared ostracism from (hypothetical) neighbors and employers because of their accent, and they added they were afraid they wouldn't find people with the same background, sharing the same cultural heritage, and who couldn't speak Spanish up north.

First language, accent and culture are students' preoccupations that have to be taken into account by faculty and administration at UTPA, so students might be made to feel more comfortable attending college. If their culture is understood and respected, their retention within university will be higher (Hobson-Horton & Owens, 2004). However, at UTPA, the retention rate was 66% in 2002, compared to 74% nationally (Ramírez-Dhoore & Jones, 2007, p. 66). Typically, this low rate of retention is explained by the number of students who have full time jobs and families and who are generally older than



the average college freshmen (Ramírez-Dhoore & Jones, 2007, p. 68). From the way students and faculty interact in the Rio Grande Valley, we can draw conclusions that can be generalizable for the rest of the country. Indeed, since 2007 Hispanics are the largest minority group as well as “the fastest- growing minority group” (www.census.gov) in the United States. Even though they are the poorest social group, their access to university is bound to increase. Therefore, it is important for educators to be prepared to deal with Hispanic students who bring their culture with them to the classroom and help them adapt to academia, while preserving their heritage, their roots, as well as their identity.

### **Research Question**

The classical school of thought (Elbow, Macrorie, Stewart) maintains that voice in writing is the expression of the self, a window to the writer's soul. Postmodernists, however, argue that humans have several voices which are not accessible to the reader through mere reading. For them, writers put on a persona, which prevents them from expressing their real selves (Faigley, Gergen K). This dichotomy has provoked much debate over the last thirty years, which is why I choose a definition of voice that is a compromise between the two schools of thought. In fact, I agree with the classical approach which states that writing reflects one's self. However, the view of one unique self is too reductive and narrow, and the concept of multiple selves within one person seems closer to reality. Elements such as age, gender, social status as well as nationality, or ethnic group affiliation influence our identity as individuals, our inner self. In our daily interactions with others, we unconsciously convey ideas about our beliefs. In these instances, our voice is going to express our inner self, and reveal our identity as well as cultural or religious membership. Furthermore, as individuals we are aware of the

relationships that shape our society, so we choose to express a facet of our inner self(ves) according to the conventions of the social or rhetorical situation. Encounters with our peers, our teachers, or our employers are ruled by conventions that are going to force us to put forward one side of our personality. Because of our membership in different social groups, we are able to express ourselves using different rhetorical devices that acknowledge our interlocutor's exigencies. Even though it is true that the social context is shaping our argument, I maintain that behind each oral or written text, a glimpse at the author's identity is possible, and that our texts are not the result of a socially constructed interaction separated from their author's identity and beliefs.

What are the voices expressed by Hispanic students in their writings? I consider that students reveal a part of themselves in their writing. Students' background, familial environment, socio-economic status and attitudes toward educational environment are believed to be key elements in shaping Hispanic students' identities. I believe that students who envision their studies in a positive way will have more confidence in themselves, and will achieve higher levels of academic success. In the United States, Hispanics in general suffer from a low economic status, and access to higher education would empower them. Results of this research will help writing teachers empathize, understand and value the life-experiences their Hispanic students acquire inside and outside the classroom, which help them positioning in their educative environment.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **What is voice?**

##### **From Sophocles to Peter Elbow**

The debate over what is voice in writing goes back to the Greeks (5th century BC) and their competing schools of thought. Sophists thought that humans were able to develop different voices for different situations, independently of the self, while Platonicians believed that “the power of language derived, to some real extent, from the nature of the rhetor's self” (Elbow, 2007, p. 169). Aristotle came along and mixed the two concepts. Elbow summarizes Aristotle's position: “it helps to be trustworthy, but if you're skilled, you can fake it” (2007, p. 169).

After the downfall of the Greek empire, the Romans kept valuing the oral tradition of debates. Oratory skills, including invention, organization, elocution, memory and pronunciation, (Sommers, 1980, p. 379) were essential for a statesman (Bowden, 1999, p. 25). Saint Augustine followed the classical school of thought, but added a Christian dimension to it. This move made him a popular author widely respected and studied in the following centuries, as the Church gained power in Europe. His texts *On free choice of the will*, *On the trinity*, *On the literal meaning of Genesis* (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy) influenced medieval European students and helped shape a

discourse moving from political to religious ends (Bedford Bibliography, p. 2). During medieval times, the study of prescriptive rules was emphasized in order to help students produce effective speech. Grammar and rhetoric consisted of the study of grammar and style, while dialectic prepared university students for oral argumentation (Bedford Bibliography, p.2). Children of the elite of society were educated to develop their oratory skills, as they were to be future statesmen (religious or not). During the Renaissance, Ramus emphasized the importance of logic in argumentation, but style, memory, and delivery were still important. However, as printed texts gained ground, rhetoricians came to the conclusion that

[t]he goal of rhetorical study was to clothe one's ideas in the most elegant dress possible, and rhetoric thus came to be seen as the finishing refinement of an upper-class education. (Bedford Bibliography, p. 3).

With the propagation of ideas in the written form, statesmen, philosophers and poets did not need to be good orators anymore. The delivery of speech became obsolete, which gave preeminence to the written text. One's ideas had now to be conveyed through his written words only, a mastery that could only be achieved by educated people.

In the United States, starting in 1806 Harvard offered rhetoric and composition classes increasingly oriented toward literary texts, and even required prospective students taking the entrance exam in English Composition to write about literary works (i.e Shakespeare). By doing so, the study of literature spread among other colleges who felt they had to follow the new norm (Bedford Bibliography, p. 4-5).

However, by the turn of the twentieth century, a shift toward students' needs and desires was made under John Dewey's progressive movement. As attendance to American universities was not solely the privilege of the elite anymore, the progressive movement aimed at addressing the needs of these new students by highlighting the usefulness of writing, rather than the study of literary prose. Progressivists had a social goal: "helping adolescents pass through their difficult developmental period and emerge as productive citizens" (Bedford Bibliography, p. 6). This was the beginning of a move toward a pedagogy more oriented toward students, their needs and their concerns. After three decades of efforts and reflection, and as mentalities had evolved in post WWII America, the Dartmouth Conference took place.

In 1966, during a conference at Dartmouth College, scholars came to the conclusion that writing pedagogy had to stress "more interaction among teacher and students", "the students' needs for self-expression", and needed to help students develop "personal writing styles that were honest and unconstrained by conventions" (Bedford Bibliography, p. 8). This emphasis on the self throws light on what Elbow calls the voice. A piece of writing is the reflection of a writer's deepest self, and reflects his concerns and ideas. The Dartmouth Conference highlighted the importance of ideas over the "most elegant dress possible" concept that had prevailed since the Renaissance, when writing became the main means of communication.

### **Peter Elbow**

In the late twentieth century, writing teachers including Peter Elbow, wrote extensively about voice as a concept, trying to define what voice is, and how to help students develop and assert their voice (Elbow, 1973, 1994; Macrorie, 1985). His position

on voice suggests that when students write, any kind of writing, they put themselves in their paper. Stewart, who shares Elbow's classical approach, writes that each author uses experiences to express himself and shape his argument, and despite living the same experiences as other people, each person will come out with a different authorial voice, one that is "not a copy of someone else's way of speaking and perceiving the world" (1972, p. 2-3). Because of the distinctiveness of each person's written voice, which is identified by particular sentence structures, references, topic choices, we can recognize a few authors. As readers we are able to identify a novel written by Hemingway, Poe, or Shakespeare, because of the distinctiveness of their voice.

For Elbow, there is one and only one voice per author, and that unique voice is the source of powerful writing (1973, p. 6-7). Through narratives, or assignments with a subject of interest to them, writers can better express their inner self. Bowden argues that this vision of writing promotes narratives and not academic writing (1999, p. 59). According to her, students should be assigned topics for which they have no interest. This method would enhance writers' rhetorical abilities, and help them develop an authorial voice different from their inner self which would not be valued.

Opponents to the classic definition of voice adopt a postmodernist approach and say that "a textual voice gives no window at all onto the real character of the author" (Elbow, 2007, p. 173). A voice is the work of an author who uses a persona, and it could in no way show any personal characteristic of its author's soul (Gergen, Bowden, Faigley). The writer just performs according to the rhetorical situation he has to face, and doesn't put himself forward. Postmodernists advocate for the authenticity of texts written using a persona and insist that a person has social selves, which can't reveal the true

personal self of a writer. They consider this understanding of composition to better serve academic writing.

Before Elbow and his opponents, the postmodernists, Bakhtin, had evoked voice as a transaction between the writer and his persona. In this dialogic approach, the writer's self and the persona are not totally separated, and the construction of a text is perceived as the result of an active negotiation between the self and the persona. For Bakhtin, each word is loaded with meanings given by previous users of this word, in a different social context, which means that “[w]e receive all our linguistic forms through others' use, and thus each carries other voices” (Woolard, 2004, p.73). Clearly, the writer has the agency to choose certain words, in a desire to construct a persona, but the reader might not adhere to this selection and have the feeling that it does not match the writer's self. Indeed, some appropriated words, meaning others' words (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 294), don't work for the reader who has the feeling that a person fakes a personality in his writings. Therefore, for Bakhtin, the persona is not an impenetrable mask, as it lets the author's personality perspire through lexical choices.

Furthermore, for Bakhtin, language is stratified by the “distinct social experiences of its speakers” (Woolard, 2004, p.86), which implies that a writer, or speaker, is going to make syntactic and lexical choices that will affiliate him with one particular group. Writers as well as speakers have the opportunity to construct their self by adopting or rejecting the dominant discourse in which their interaction with others takes place. However, the perception of their text or speech depends upon the receiver's opinion, based on his own status, and the social persona (real or perceived) of the sender (Agha, 2003, p 233). These relationships are actually hierarchical. The person with the most

power (social status, group membership, ethnicity, etc.) has the command to establish a vertical relation (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 372), or in other words, can choose to accept or reject the sender's message as being fake or not up to his standards. For example, an African American student writing a thesis in African American English will see his identity acknowledged, but his writing will be rejected by his readers, his teachers, as not being up to the standards of Standard American English. However, if the same student, who usually speaks Ebonics in the classroom writes his thesis in Standard English, his paper will be more acceptable for his teachers, but they might not accept this new persona, and see it as fake. This example shows that a person can have several identities (or voices), which might be conflicting in one individual. However, they are the reflection of individuals moving in society and can evolve over time, as each person changes, due to social interaction with others.

Postmodernists disagree with the classical approach on voice as presented by Elbow, which contends that one human being equals one voice, or the notion that the self is envisioned as “stable, coherent, unitary, and autonomous” (Lense 1998, p. 264). This vision is too limited, as seen above, because a person has multiple personalities, as members of different social groups, based on age, gender and ethnicity to name a few. Bakhtin insists on the co-existence of the self and persona in a text, and emphasizes the social power with which words are loaded. I think that voice is a compromise of these views, as we all have several selves, according to the context of the discourse, whether written or oral. Based on rhetorical situations and social context, the writer has the agency to adapt to his audience and present a more acceptable persona (Agha, 2003, p 268). For example, we have a different voice or persona as grand-children writing a



postcard to their grand-parents; we have a different voice or persona when sending that same postcard to a friend; and we have another voice or persona sending that very same postcard to our employer. However, we are the same person, able to express the same idea in different ways, by making semantic and syntactic choices for different rhetorical situations, and by appropriating words already used by our peers and infused with meaning.

### **The sound of the written voice**

The concept of voice in writing is often linked to the biologic voice, the one that comes out of the mouth. Greek and Roman orators used their voice as a tool to convince their audience, and their elocution was as important as the four other parts of the oratory scheme - invention, organization, memory and pronunciation (Sommers, 1980, p. 379). When writing about voice, scholars often intermingle the concepts of writing and elocution. For instance, Elbow advises that voice is “the force that will make a reader listen to [a writer]” (1973, p. 6-7), suggesting that a reader is going to imagine the author talking when reading. When faced with a paper that is lacking something, teachers often comment “I don't hear your voice here,” as they don't see any trace of a writer expressing a self (one his many selves) on the piece of paper. If voice was just a writing style, teachers would just write that they don't “see” the voice, or use another terminology.

Bakhtin suggests that the writer needs to “create the background necessary for his own voice, outside of which his artistic prose nuances cannot be perceived, and without which they *'do not sound'*” (1981, p. 278). These words send us back to orality and its intrinsic relationship to the written text. Bakhtin demonstrates the importance of assembling words that are going to produce a sound effect desired by the writer. It also

emphasizes how much the writer needs to pay attention to his rhetorical devices. Word choice is very important for Bakhtin, however, using the right words is not easy, as a word “becomes one's own only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” (1981, p. 293). Indeed, even though words have a meaning of their own, it is only when being used in a particular context, in addition to other words, that they are going to get their full expressive potential, and express the “voice” of the writer. All writers can access the English vocabulary through their own mental lexicon, but it is in the way the words are matched with ideas or the personality of the author (real or perceived) that a writer differentiates his self (or her self) from others.

### **Identity or voice?**

So, far I have used the terms *voice* and *identity* interchangeably, because I think that voice is the reflection of one's identity, made up of several components that shape one's personality.

Even though she argues that the voice is not a reflection of the self, Bowden writes that “[h]owever it is framed, voice is a pivotal metaphor in composition and rhetoric studies because it focuses attention on authorship, on identity, on narrative and on power” (1999, p. viii). The word “identity” here is important, as after all, what is identity if not the self? Even if a writer uses a persona, writing, just like painting, singing, dancing, dressing or walking, reveals a part of ourselves. Who would say that the way Michael Jackson danced did not reflect his personality? Even if he was putting on a show, his instinctive moves showed his true self, which is why he had fans: people who could see in him a reflection of a part of themselves. He had thousands of impersonators who,

despite their best efforts, were never able to create the same frenzy he did. Who would suggest that *The Persistence of Memory* does not reflect a part of what was going on in Dali's mind? His whole work reflected a particular way to look at objects, and his work is recognizable even among other surrealist painters. Would Toni Morrison have been able to write stories the way she does, if she had not been an African American raised amid a culture favoring story-telling?

Writing, even for a graded essay, requires a commitment from the writer in terms of time and reflection. The topic, the organization of the paper, the arguments and examples reveal the writer's experiences and ways of thinking. For Lensmire, an advocate of workshops in order to develop the student's voice, "there can be no personal voice in the writing without this personal investment, this active engagement" (1998, p. 266). The writer's word choice reveals, at least, a bit of himself. If he puts on a persona, words still show a part of his thinking, as his persona is also the product of his creativity, and his sense of inquiry. All these elements can be associated with the self, identity, and the voice. However, is the writer just reflecting his own voice, or is he reflecting the voice of a social group he belongs to?

### **Individual voice or social community voice?**

According to Fulwiler, "our voices are determined largely outside of our selves, according to where we live, and work, what we read, and with whom we interact" (1994, p. 157). Our voices indeed, reveal our thoughts and way of thinking, which are influenced by our experiences. As our voice is intimately related to our self(ves), it is shaped by our environment. A student raised in a rural area by catholic parents, will have a different outlook on life than an urban student raised by atheist parents. These differences will

appear in choices they make when writing, which will be reflected not only in the topics that will interest them, but also the kind of arguments they will use, as well as the rhetorical devices employed. For Bruffee, “language and its products, such as thought and the self are social artifacts constituted by social communities (Bruffee quoted in Fulwiler, 1999, p. 36). Here the power of one's environment is again mentioned in a way that corresponds to the definition of culture given by Liggett. She explains that “the term [refers] to a dynamic of social values, cognitive codes, behavioral standards, world views and beliefs used to give order and meaning to people's lives” (Liggett, 2009, p. 29).

The word “dynamic” here suggests that world views, standards and beliefs are evolving values, because they are shaped by a geographical, political and social context. As Bucholtz and Hall put it, identities are “forged in action rather than fixed in categories” (2004, p. 376). Our world views and beliefs are shaped and influenced by our gender, age, family members, the language and dialect we speak, and political and religious values we have, and places where we live. Even though we have the agency to choose to adopt ideas opposed to our cultural environment, we will have the possibility to be members of several social communities, but never to be members of none. One can be a member of several “social communities” or have several “cultures,” whether geographical, linguistic, ethnic, religious, political, economic, sexual, artistic or professional.

### **Identity or culture?**

Culture is hard to define. It is even harder to define migrant communities without perpetuating stereotypes, and without representing these communities as fixed in times. As explained above, identities are fluctuating values, dependent upon geographical,

social, cultural, and political environment. When referring to migrant communities, we tend to focus on “sameness” or the most salient features of a social group (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 370). Defining a migrant community is a complex task, as in contact with the dominant culture, some features will become obsolete, while others will be emphasized as a way to maintain a distance with the mainstream culture (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 371)

What are the characteristics of the Hispanic migrant community? Can we draw general conclusions that are going to be applicable to all the migrants? Probably not, as these migrants, will also be members of other social communities based on their gender, age, education, etc. González, who conducted longitudinal surveys in the Mexican migrant community of Tucson, Arizona, suggests that we should be wary of what is considered as culture, as too many generalizations have been drawn hastily about attitudes of Latino migrants (she uses the term Latino), regarding education for example. Instead, she proposes to use the term “identity” as culture is too broad and can lead to misunderstanding and misconceptions (2001, chapter 8).

### **Teachers need to open-up**

#### **Let's meet halfway**

Haas and Flower argue that “a text is understood not only as content and information, but also as a result of someone's intentions, as part of a larger discourse world, and as having real effects on real readers” (1988, p. 170). They advocate for rhetorical reading, a process that requires active participation from the reader. This concept contends that:

Readers' and writers' mental representations are not limited to verbally well-formed ideas and plans, but may include information coded as visual images, or as emotions, or as linguistic propositions that exist just above the level of specific words. (1988, p. 169)

In rhetoric and composition classes, we ask our students to read between the lines to better understand the real purpose of an author, to try to know that author's background, and figure out in what context the text was written, following the model proposed by Haas and Flower. As experienced readers, instructors should adopt the same attitude toward their students' papers. They should meet them halfway, and be active readers looking for their students' voice in order to understand where their students come from. For Kells (1995), instructors have to understand that “the discourse of the bicultural student implicitly and explicitly conveys these vital bonds to their communities of origin, as well as the realities of living on geographical and sociological borders of Anglo-American society” (p. 91). By using the word “implicitly” Kells suggests that the reader, in this case the instructor, has to make the effort to read between the lines, and understand the social communities shaping the writers' discourse and identity, or in other words: his voice. Nero (2006) confirms this pedagogical approach. For her, teachers should be trained to analyze their students' language, as well as identifying “the historical and socio-cultural context within which the student's language and literacy have emerged” (p. 192-193). The historical and socio-cultural contexts are of particular importance in the Rio Grande Valley, a land that belonged to Mexico and was populated by Spanish-speaking inhabitants who had to undergo American rule. Ostracism toward local

population lasted quite a long time, and it is common to find people who heard from their parents about the time when teachers in the Valley were Anglo teachers who forbade the use of Spanish in the classroom. Students are not going to reveal the scars of their past just right away. It is however the role of the teacher to be aware that they exist, to acknowledge them to comprehend the dynamics going on in the writing class.

### **Can you hear me?**

Tolerance and understanding vis-à-vis students' writing voice, whether it reflects syntactical choices linked to a first language other than English or a dialect other than Standard American English, have been encouraged. Literature on L2 writing (Nero, 2006; Matsuda, Cox, Jordan and Ortmeier-Hooper, 2006) gives us, teachers of writing, ways to deal with problems that appear in writing and attitudes to have towards students in the classroom. Shaughnessy tried to reassure students that her approach to academic discourse would not "weaken their existing relationship with their home cultures" (Lu, 1992, p. 890), and she even urged "teachers to honor students' resistance to deracination" (Lu, 1992, p. 890). In a study involving Mexican students in the United States, Roosens confirms that teachers have to understand the psychological state of mind of their students, especially first generation immigrants, who (even though they came voluntarily to the United States) fear social rejection, long to return to Mexico, and "see little reason to immerse themselves in the language and culture of their host country" (Roosens, 1989, p. 134).

Respect for students' home culture was also encouraged during the Conference on College Composition and Communication held in 1974 during which the *Students' right to their own language* charter was drafted. Educators reflected on the predominance of

Standard American English in the classroom, its impact on students who did not master it, and whether it was causing a rejection of these students “because of their racial, social and cultural origins” (1974, p.3) The document called for a shift in the way writing was approached. Instead of asking everybody to talk with one voice, as if from the same mainstream culture for the sake of a unitary discourse, scholars thought about encouraging diverging voices, especially if they “shifted that emphasis to precise, effective, and appropriate communication in diverse ways, whatever the dialect” (1974, p. 3). This text valued non standard varieties of English in the U.S., mainly African American English and Chicano English.

Despite such resolutions, and the literature on the respect of second language learners coming to English classes in the U.S. (Matsuda, Cox, Jordan and Ortmeier-Hooper, 2006) (Nero, 2006) (Kubota and Lin, 2009), Canagarajah (2006) felt the need to advocate for a bigger place given to what he calls World Englishes. World Englishes (WE) are varieties of English spoken by bilinguals in countries where English is not the only and/or dominant language (India, for instance). Canagarajah cites his own case: born in Sri Lanka, he considers himself equally proficient in Tamil (home and everyday language) and “‘Standard American' or 'Standard British' English which is treated as the target for conversational and literate purposes in educational institutions” (2006, p. 588). We need to add the English spoken by English as a second language learners to this community of WE, specifically those who make their way in business and academia in various domains. The community of speakers of the “non-standard” variety of English is growing as globalization is spreading. Canagarajah cites Graddol who established that “in the future, English will be a language used mainly in multilingual contexts as a second



language and for a communication between non-native speakers” (quoted in Canagarajah, 2006, p. 589). This view confirms what Bakhtin said about the end of national languages associated with one state (1981, p. 12) and shows the necessity for monolingual Americans to open up to World Englishes and non standard varieties of English, in order to become “functional postmodern global citizens” (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 591). Canagarajah cites examples of CNN reporters and customer representatives working in India who make their way into the lives of monolingual American citizens, creating for them a need to adapt to an evolving world.

Canagarajah warns that the English speaking community, at large, including speakers of World Englishes and second language learners, know “there are millions of people around the world who use varieties like their own and are open to negotiating differences with sensitivity and skill” (2006, p. 589). If such an attitude is empowering, a lot still needs to be done in the U.S. writing classroom, as non standard varieties of English are often authorized in first drafts only (Elbow), or when there is a dialogue, but the author's voice has to be expressed in Standard English or Metropolitan English (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 594).

### **Orality vs written text**

English has become a lingua franca, that is to say a common language spoken by people from diverse nationalities in order to do business, or research for instance. Non-native speakers of English find themselves negotiating contracts with other non native speakers, and oral competency becomes as important as writing competence. However, these speakers don't always use standard varieties of English. In the video *Writing across borders* (Roberston, 2005), a writing teacher notes that international students enrolled in

an ESL program at Oregon university “speak with an accent, so they write with an accent”. What she acknowledges is that English as a second language students might develop an argument in a different way than native English speakers. While American teachers encourage students to write reader-based prose (Flower, 1979), that is to say essays that are going to answer all the questions the reader may have, a Japanese student explained that in her culture, it is the opposite. Indeed, the reader is invited to read rhetorically, guess what the writer was trying to say. Furthermore, L2 English students might make syntactic or lexical choices influenced by their first language.

While this may seem obvious, it doesn't seem to be implicit anymore when students leave the ESL classroom and integrate into regular classes with native speakers and work with monolingual teachers. In *I am how I sound*, Ivani and Camps (2001) emphasize the importance for the reader, in this case the teacher, to be aware of students' identities in order to understand students' voices even when they are written: “writers come to 'sound like' one social group or another, according to their linguistic choices, in spite of the fact that writing is devoid of phonetic and prosodic features” (2001, p. 6).

This link between orality and writing is often made and can be seen as a weakness in students' papers. I recently heard a colleague complaining that students write like they talk. I would like to suggest that when students write as they speak, they show their personality, shaped by their environment, and that using another way of speaking or writing, would be like asking them to change the way they walk or stand, as talk and writing are intimate acts.

In the context of the Rio Grande Valley, instructors have to consider the dominance of the oral Hispanic culture (Kells, 1995, p. 8). Students prefer talking rather

than writing, because it is how their culture developed and how they were educated. When asked about their literacy practices, my first-year composition students generally mention having read few books and not being pushed to read by their families. In 1995, Kells dealt with the opposition literacy versus orality, and concluded that “as teachers of English we implicitly privilege literacy over orality, standard American over the idiom of our students' home culture” (p. 101), showing that despite the best intentions, the students' rights to their own language is not implemented in the classroom.

### **Who teaches to whom?**

Seen from outside, the United States seems to be a melting pot of people of different colors, religions and cultural origins. Recent immigrants mix with the descendants of the pilgrims in a climate that is giving its chance to people from all backgrounds and respects all differences, including linguistic differences. However, when we look at figures, it appears that some social groups are favored as education is in the hands of one group, which does not reflect the diversity of the country. As education is dominated by white monolingual teachers, it could be feared that they produce and reproduce patterns aimed at reinforcing the dominating position of people who adapt to standard mainstream culture, while not offering the same opportunity and respect to minority groups of students.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “[i]n 2007, some 20% of children ages 5 -17 (or 10.8 million) spoke a language other than English at home” , 90% of the teachers (K-12) were White (National Education Association, 2003), and 97% spoke only English (Darling Hammond and Sclan (1996) quoted in Marx, 2009, p. 82). These figures might need to be taken cautiously because of a problem in the classification

by the census. However, they show a disparity among the student bodies attending K-12 schools in the U.S., and the background of their instructors. Therefore, questions linked to the attitudes of the instructors (K-12 as well as college) regarding the students' first language, ethnicity, and cultural background can arise.

For Kells, “serving a bicultural population requires a kind of cultural shift on the part of the monocultural teacher” (1995, p. 66), meaning that teachers have to be aware of the differences between their own discourse representing academia, and their students' discourse representing their ethnic heritage, and to respect these difference. Students are expected to acquire Standard American English (SAE), even though it is not the language spoken at home. Insisting on presenting SAE as the only phonological and grammatical proper form of expression in the classroom means that students' dialect is not acceptable and can create a feeling of inferiority, inadequacy and shame among them.

Furthermore, while in some countries multilingualism (or bilingualism, and bi-dialectism for that matter) is banal and “sociolinguistics happen in every street corner” (Muchiri et al, 1990, p. 189), “[f]or monolinguals in the US, ideas like 'speech community' or 'code-switching' or 'register' have to be painstakingly established as abstractions and illustrated with data” (Muchiri et al., 1990, p. 189). Code-switching can be seen as a lack of fluency in English, which conveys negative connotations, whereas in other places with a multilingual population such as the Rio Grande Valley, it is the norm. Being aware of these practices helps teachers perceive their students' speech habits in a more positive light and promote students' confidence.

Muchiri, Mshindi, Myers and Descourous advocate for a greater teachers' awareness of their students' language use, which is part of their identity, in order to

encourage a better expression of their ideas. Denying one's native language (or dialect) is to denigrate one's ability to communicate (Kells, 1995, p. 64). If a student sees his own language devalued, he will draw conclusions about his own value as a student and a human being. Students are then left speechless, and through them, it is the whole society they represent that is rejected (Shuy, 1971), leaving that group voiceless and powerless. The problem is not necessarily the students' language or dialect, but rather the “negative attitudes (inside and outside the academy as well as within teachers and students)” (Nero, 2006, p. 194), which lead the student to feel a pressure to assimilate (Hobson-Horton & Owens, 2004, p. 89) to the dominant culture. This pressure ultimately leads to academic failure as students feel unadapted to school environment, which is not surprising since “parameters for bicultural students have been set by those whose primary language and discourse reflect the dominant culture” (Kells, 1995, p. 84).

The situation in the Valley does not reflect national statistics, as most grade school teachers are from the Valley and if not bilingual, they are aware and appreciative of the Hispanic culture of the Valley. However, while this is not showed on the statistics booklet (UTPA, 2008), there is a disparity between the number of Hispanic students and the number of teachers of Hispanic origin at UTPA. Most first-year composition instructors are not from the Valley and are monolingual, so we can wonder how they deal with their students' self-esteem as individuals and as a social group, since they speak “two socially under-valued and misunderstood language variations” (Kells, 1999, p. 132).

## Summary

In this section I showed that voice and persona can co-exist in one person, and still show the writer's identity. Then, I discussed the term “identity” and how I think it is linked to culture. Identity is a fluctuating value that is evolving, as culture does, depending on the socio-cultural, geographical and political context surrounding a specific group.

In the second half of the section, I examined the role of the teacher in the multilingual or multicultural class, and concluded that teachers have to make an effort to understand their students' language habits at home, the socio-political context that surrounds their presence in the classroom, and the link between orality and the production of written texts. In order to avoid generating imperialist, or elitist discourse, teachers need to respect and encourage plurality in the classroom, whether it be multilingualism, multidialectism or multiculturalism, in order to respect the students' rights to their own language.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Selection of participants**

The participants were students enrolled in first-year composition classes at the University of Texas-Pan American during the Spring semester 2010. I announced the topic of my research in English 1301 Rhetoric and Composition classes, and those students who volunteered to participate filled out a consent form on which they gave their contact information. The main criterion of selection was for students to identify themselves as Hispanic.

Students who were interested in participating in the survey were then contacted and invited to submit a draft of a project already written for their writing class. By the time the study was conducted, students had completed a project in which they wrote about their literacy practices, and a few short assignments. As a few Eng 1301 teachers shared a common syllabus that semester, students enrolled with different instructors followed a Writing About Writing syllabus, which entails that students read scholarly articles discussing the writing process, and then reflected on their own writing or learning experiences. The essays written were narratives focusing on the literacy practices students developed at home, and their relationship with the articles read in class

I didn't really know what to expect when I read the drafts, and thought that my study would mainly focus on syntactic choices that could be attributed to students' Spanish-speaking heritage. Following Hirvela and Belcher's (2001) analysis of mature L2 graduate students' papers, I read students' drafts and concentrated on the ideas developed. Sometimes, in as little as a few words, writers can reveal a deep thought or a societal problem. My analysis not only focused on the topic chosen by students but also consisted of paying a careful attention to sentences that might seem trivial but could actually reveal a lot about students, their families, their education and their views on social issues. For example, as I read the drafts, I noticed the recurrent importance of women, the difficulty for students to learn how to read and write in English, and the complaint of students who saw their parents struggling financially to make ends meet.

As I had read González' book *I am my language*, a longitudinal study taking place in the borderlands of Arizona, I decided to look for differences or similarities between the two places, in order to find patterns that could be generalized about the Hispanic communities living in the United States. The book emphasized the role of women as pivotal agents in the development of literacy in households of Mexican origin in Tucson, Arizona. As Valleyites are more prone to code-switching than their Arizonian counterparts, I suspected that language attitudes would be different in the local households.

The second point that I wanted to investigate was the use of Spanish words in a paper written in English for an English Composition class. I noticed that two students had code-switched in their paper. The Spanish words seemed to have been used purposely, and were not the result of a slip. I had not thought about finding such results and decided



to inquire about language attitudes toward code-switching among my subjects, as I thought it could be quite revealing.

### **Interviews**

Only seven students showed up for the interviews (2 females and 5 males), out of the eleven students originally contacted. The four students who withdrew from the project were busy with their classes and had to turn in projects, and it was not possible to meet them after all. The seven remaining students were interviewed individually (the interviews were recorded) on campus during regular class times, one time each for about 35 minutes. For the purpose of this study, however, I will focus on five students only, as their stories are more relevant to my purpose, which first is to discuss the role women play in implementing language attitudes in the homes of students of Mexican descent, then to reflect on their response to a world that is changing around them. Finally I will investigate the use of Spanish words in writing and find the motivation behind this unusual written practice.

### **Questionnaire**

The goal of the interviews was to know more about each student's background in terms of their first language, place of birth and motivation to attend college. It was thought that age and place of birth might reveal different patterns of thoughts. I then asked students about their ethnic affiliation, to see if they identified as Latino/as or Hispanics, and the difference they make between the two. Also, I asked students how they would describe their language. As we are in South Texas, it is understood that people speak Tex-Mex, but I wanted to know how students would answer this question, and their understanding of what Tex-Mex is. As Tex-Mex is a mix of English with a few

Spanish words, I thought it was relevant to ask all students about their attitude toward code-switching in speech or writing, as it could be relevant to the purpose of this study to discover the reasons behind their opposition to it. These questions were asked with regards to Kells' article *Understanding the rhetorical value of Tejano codeswitching* (2004), in which she dealt with South Texas College students too. Since she studied in an area that has a different socio-political context, I thought that answers from Valleyites might offer a different perspective.

González's book, *I Am my language* (2001), was primordial in shaping the questionnaire regarding literacy practices of students at home, the language ideologies their parents enforced, and the influence their parents placed on completing homework. Furthermore, the two students who had code-switched in their paper were asked to explain what motivated their decision.

### **Participants**

Here is a brief description of the students who were interviewed for this study. Details regarding their writings and their answers will be provided in Chapter IIV. Names have been changed, however they reflect the names commonly found on a roster in first-year composition classes.

#### *Ana*

At the time of the interview she is thirty-three years old and has one child. Born in Monterrey (Mexico), she holds a Bachelor's degree in Business Management and a Master's degree in Education. She was well-off in Mexico, but as violence increased she felt unsafe, and decided to move to the United States. She says that she came to improve her English, but it is mainly to start a new career in nursing. Once she graduates she

wants to work in the U.S., as part of her family is already here: her dad already went through the nursing program she wants to join. She prefers being called Hispanic, and as she has been in the United States for only one semester, she says that she speaks English with a Spanish accent.

*Sandra*

She was born in the Rio Grande Valley to a Mexican American mother and a Cuban father. She is eighteen years old, wants to be a social worker and work for Child Protection Services. She says that her first language is English, even though she was raised by her grandma who was born in Mexico and came to the U.S. when she was young. She mainly speaks Spanish. As a child, Sandra was raised by her grandma and her aunt, her mom's sister, who is actually only two years older than she is. The young girls attended school where English was taught, and came back home where their grandma spoke Spanish. However, Sandra did not become fluent in Spanish, whereas her aunt did. Sandra identifies as both Hispanic, as she is part Mexican, and Latina as she is part Cuban, even though she doesn't have contacts with this side of the Cuban side of her family. She says she speaks Tex-Mex, which is a mix of English with a few Spanish words, as she defined it.

*David*

He is a returning student. After working full-time for several years after graduating from high school, he decided to go to college in order to get a degree in music education and be a choir director. His first language is Spanish, the language spoken at home by his parents. His father was a Valley native and his mother was born in Mexico. She doesn't speak English fluently. David attended a Spanish speaking elementary

school in the Valley, and then integrated into English only classes starting in fourth grade. He identifies as Hispanic and Native American on his mom's side. He says he speaks Tex-Mex, a mixture of both English and Spanish as he defines it.

### *Barnabas*

Eighteen years old, he is the son of a farm worker who came to work to the United States and met a Hispanic woman from Texas, in Ohio. After having their son, they returned to Texas. Barnabas goes to college to “seek the truth” as he puts it, and plans on getting a degree in environmental science. He speaks Spanish as a first language, identifies as Hispanic and doesn't really know what label to place on the language or dialect he speaks. He describes it as a mix of English and Spanish when he speaks to his parents. He is also aware that in other areas of the country people have different accents, and he attributes this difference to the fact that they don't speak Spanish.

### *Jaime*

Born in Yuma, Arizona, he came to the Valley when he was nine. He tried to attend college while being a National Guard and in the army, but because of conflicting schedules he had to make a choice. He then joined the army and now, at twenty-nine, thanks to his 9/11 bill, he goes back to school to become an art teacher. His first language is English because his mother who was bilingual made an effort to speak English at home. His father only spoke Spanish, but as he was a farm worker, he just came back home during the week-ends. Jaime accepts the general term Hispanic, but prefers saying he is an American of Mexican descent, as it is more accurate. Regarding his way of speaking, he says that he speaks English with a different accent than most people, even those from the Valley. He explains that people across the country have different accents,

and he just happens to have one that reflects his environment. However, he admits that when he was in the army he was told that he had a different accent than his fellow soldiers from the Rio Grande Valley. Also, he does not approve of the habit of mixing English and Spanish in the same sentence.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

#### **Findings**

When I started this study, as a second language learner, and a teaching assistant instructing rhetoric and composition, I was interested in discovering what were the voices that Hispanic students enrolled at the University of Texas-Pan American, a Hispanic-Serving Institution in South Texas, expressed in their writings. Knowing that Hispanics are a minority growing in number in the country, I wanted to find out what Hispanic students living in the Rio Grande Valley, where more than 85% of the population identifies as Hispanic, had to say about identity, language, bilingualism, or their living conditions.

This chapter is divided in two sections: findings and analysis. In the first section, I will provide a theoretical linguistic framework for my findings. In the first part of the section, I will describe the importance of women in Hispanic households, and their role in the spreading of literacy and language ideologies. I will also discuss about Mexican Americans manipulating language, having agency in language, and code-switching when writing. The second part of the section will give an insight into Hispanic women's desire to find new ways to adapt to an evolving culture by converting to evangelical

Christianity. The second section will illustrate the findings with examples found in students' writing and the details they provided during their interviews.

### **Language**

Language plays a crucial role in the shaping of identities, and “among the many symbolic resources available for production of identity, language is the most flexible and pervasive” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 369). Indeed, it is through the use and mastery of a language that people are going to position themselves, to affirm or reject an identity. The mastery of Spanish is not the only element signaling a Hispanic heritage among Mexican Americans living in the United States. However, I am going to focus on language, as it was a prominent theme in the pieces of writing that I collected.

As said earlier, people in the Valley speak Tex-Mex, a mix of English and Spanish. Kells (2004) already studied this phenomenon during her studies in South Texas. Even though in other places code-switching has a negative connotation (Urciuoli, 2003), in the Valley it is really an accepted practice that can be observed in almost every place. The geographical location of the Valley and its population suggest that stereotypes associated with code-switching have disappeared. During our interviews, most students revealed that they were not code-switching when they wrote. From this perspective, we can draw the conclusion that oral code-switching has “interactional functions”, meaning that it is dependent upon one's interlocutors and topic of conversation, rather than being the result of “speaker motivations” (Woolard, 2004, p. 84). Even though code-switching is a very banal speech act in the Valley, it has its detractors as we'll see in the next paragraph.

**Agency.** Duranti (2004), defines agency as follows:

Agency is (...) understood as the property of those entities  
(i) that have some degree of control over their own  
behavior, (ii) whose actions in the world affect other  
entities' (and sometimes their own), and (iii) whose actions  
are the object of evaluation (e.g. in terms of their  
responsibility for a given outcome) (p.453)

I use the example of Hispanic mothers, who made a choice to control their own behavior, these decisions affected other entities (their children), and their actions can be evaluated, as in this study.

Students in this study reported that their parents, especially their mothers, were active agents in their choosing to use one language over the other at home. These mothers are motivated by the desire to make their children successful at school, in order for them to get a better life than they did, as they struggled financially due to a lack of education. However, when parents are bilingual or monolingual Spanish speakers, different dynamics take place in the households. Indeed, while English represents the future and a good education, Spanish represents a traditional value that is transmitted from generation to generation. Nonetheless, despite their mother's efforts, some children will not acquire enough Spanish to have a conversation, because they speak English at school.

Also, even though Tex-Mex is common practice in the Valley, some students admit only speaking Tex-Mex with their parents or close friends, which is what Kells (2004) calls situational (context-dependent) code-switching (p. 32). On the other hand, some students consider that this is a bad practice associated with poor values, and make a



clear choice not to code-switch. Despite their environment, these students choose to construct a different self that is going to be based on opposition to the main culture in the area. As they differ from the main group, they affirm their identity as speakers of “good Spanish”, placing their value of reference elsewhere. Here Duranti (2004) evokes three different types of evaluation as part of agency, which are linked to morality, performance and connotations (p. 454). Students who reject the use of code-switching in speech perform moral judgments regarding the “presentation and realization of a self “ (Duranti, 2004, p. 454), evaluate “someone's words as they contribute towards the constitution of culture-specific acts” (Duranti, 2004, p 454), and finally, they evaluate someone's artful display of knowledge (Duranti, 2004. p. 454). As listeners, opponents of oral code-switching think that individuals who code-switch show a bad image of themselves, as members of the Hispanic community and of the community itself. They are aware that it is an activity that is constitutive of the culture they represent, and don't agree with the image that it gives of themselves to others. Oddly enough, they don't worry about code-switching giving a bad image of the Hispanic community to other Americans. Instead, they care about the respect of the Spanish language, a scale with which they can measure one's value. They judge others on their language competence which has to stand up to their own standard.

**Code-switching in writing.** This is an unexpected outcome to my study. I knew that students code-switched in oral communication, but thought that they did not do it when writing for a class. However, I found that two students code-switched intrasententially (within a sentence) . These were two instances of voluntary switch to Spanish, and not just a slip as they wrote hastily. I argue that in these cases, code-

switching was intentional, as the writers wanted to produce an effect on their readers, in this case their peers. Duranti explains that intentionality is difficult to assess, as it has its limitations. Indeed we cannot always make assumptions about someone else's planning (2004, p. 453). However, in the case of the two students in my study, their deliberate intention to communicate with their peers was made clear during our interview.

### **Religion as a new framework for the family**

One of the students in my study revealed that his mother was a Catholic converted to Pentecostalism when she moved to the United States. She became a very active reader of the Bible, and studied it in order to fully understand the meaning of the texts. Her son was invited to participate during her study sessions. I will talk more at length of this case in my analysis section, but this finding was important as it had already been observed by González (2001) in Arizona. Hispanics are mainly Catholic. However, when a group of people find themselves in a different environment, some values will be subject to change. Religion seems to be one of these values. González explains that women are at the origin of this movement, as they are looking for a new “framework on which to hang their everyday existence” (2001, p. 85), as a consequence of a change in their points of reference.

### **Summary**

Agency in language, conversion to evangelical Christianity and code-switching in writing are representative of the Hispanic community because such actions are reflective, not constructive, of social identities (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 376). Indeed, as these language practices have already been observed in another area, they seem to be the common feature of a society that is evolving as it is moving to a country with different

values, language, and life-style. In her study, González highlighted the same results about mothers who committed to their children' s homework, chose to speak English at home, and changed religion. I thought that it was interesting that students in a different type of borderland, where Hispanics are the majority and where code-switching is common practice would talk about the same features. If we consider the idea of identity as the idea of sameness, then this is revealing that there is something in common between Hispanics in the Valley and in Tucson, Arizona, and that we touch at the core of the preoccupations of the Hispanic community in the United States.

### **Analysis**

Women play a very important role in Hispanic families living in the borderlands. Workers, single moms or married women, they play a crucial role in the education of their children and the passing on of literacy practices and traditions. All at once enforcers of old customs and innovators (González, 2001, p. 70), their attitude toward language use is at the core of the centripetal and centrifugal forces that animate each household. Tradition and modernity, English and Spanish, Catholicism and Protestantism form a dichotomy reflecting the internal conflicts of families undergoing identity changes, as they form new patterns when adapting to new social rules and norms. Initiated by women, these transformations aim at negotiating new identities that will keep enforcing traditional cultural values, while at the same time adopting the customs of the dominant society.

**The importance of women in Hispanic households.**

González (2001) conducted a longitudinal survey among Hispanic households in Arizona, which revealed the importance of women in the spreading of literacy and the role they had in enforcing teaching practices transmitted to their children at school. She observed, interviewed and recorded eight households and studied the language habits and literacy practices of Mexican American families living in Tucson. The families selected had been living in the United States for different periods of time and were from various economic backgrounds.

**Women and the power of education.** The pieces of writing given by the participants of this study showed similar patterns to the ones noticed by González, who notes that

[m]others, fiercely attempting to ensure success for their children, often resort to the discursive practices sanctioned by the voice of the school and reproduce the forms, modes of thinking, style, and meaning legitimated through their own institutional experiences. (2001, p. 154)

In my study, Sandra wrote a paper talking about her literacy practices, and remembered that her grandma taught her letters when she entered school, because she “didn't want teacher to be talking mess about her not teaching me how to write”. She went on and added that her grandma made her practice reading, everyday after school for thirty minutes; however, she did not help her. Reflecting on this experience, Sandra added “[m]y grandma would have me re-view my work but never occurred to see if I had any mistakes”.

Sandra's grandma (who raised her instead of her mother) wanted to reinforce the teaching provided to her grand-daughter at school. She did her best to help the young student by asking her to read, just as she was probably taught when she attended school. In a desire to please teachers who expected Sandra to do her homework and to progress, she made her go over her homework; however, as her knowledge of English was limited, she could not help Sandra if she mispronounced words or skipped lines. The fact that she spoke little English when Sandra was a child, prevented her from checking Sandra's comprehension of a text or her writing assignments. She could not go over the instructions and decipher them for her grand-daughter who had to rely on herself to understand and do her homework properly. Nonetheless, her grandmother did her best to enforce discipline regarding school matters, and Sandra remembers that if she tried to say that she didn't want to do her homework, she would “double the work”. Here we can see the effects of an “old school” type of teaching enforcing punitive methods, which probably corresponds to the type of teaching the grandma received as a child, as explained by González.

The fact that Sandra mentions that her grandma worried about what teachers would think of the quality of the education she transmitted to the child she brought up, reveals a profound concern for education. The grandma respected and valued teachers and the educational system, and wanted to show it by making sure that her grand-daughter could move up to the next grade level every year. During her interview, Sandra mentioned that her grandma actually feared that neighbors and teachers would criticize her parenting skills, which would have resulted in her being held back one year if they had seen that she was not able to write properly.

This is a very interesting point that shows that education is highly valued and that the opinion of teachers is important and respected, as González noticed (2001, p. 188). Since Sandra grew up in a very small town, it also tells us about a community involved in the education of its youth, looking down on those who do not do their best to provide this opportunity to their offspring. Having a failing child would not be considered as the child's fault but seen as bad parenting.

When recalling his early childhood and literacy practices, Jaime, who spent his first years in Yuma, Arizona, mentions the importance of family as part of a student's educational success, with an emphasis on women. In his assignment, he remembers that his “large family was an area of abundant information and at times too much to absorb. The leader of that pack is usually a mother and in this case it will remain that way”. A conversation with Jaime brought light to what he meant by “large family” and why he referred to his mom as “the leader of that pack”.

When Jaime was a child, his mother worked and lived alone with five boys. Her husband was a farm worker who only came back home on weekends. Raising five sons almost by herself, she made the choice to use English at home, as it was the language taught to her children at school. Spanish was spoken during the weekends, when Jaime's father came back from the fields. Homework was the opportunity for the family to show its cohesion, and all the brothers sat around a table and worked on math, reading and writing problems, all together. Academic achievement was everybody's concern in this brotherhood.

When Jaime was nine years old, his eldest brother was eighteen. Being with four older brothers discussing all sorts of topics helped him develop reading, writing and

behavioral habits that he might not have acquired if he had been raised in a wealthier household where each child had their own bedroom and space. This constant influx of information on various topics helped him grow up and mature faster, not only as a human being, but also in his studies.

Even though his mother was rarely present during homework sessions because she worked, Jaime acknowledges that she enforced a behavior favoring education and the development of literacy practices. During our interview, he revealed that she drove her sons to the library as the only safe place in town where her sons would not be contacted by gang members from Los Angeles, who had already recruited the four eldest ones. Jaime explained that she drove her sons to the library because it was on the other side of town from where they lived. However, we can also assume that it is because a library represents values that are not associated with drugs and violence, but instead promotes hard work, education, academic achievement and financial success.

Jaime also revealed that because his brothers were in trouble as they started to enroll in gangs, his mother made the decision to leave Yuma, Arizona, and to come to the Rio Grande Valley, where she was from. Even though this was a family decision, it was initiated by his mother who proved to be a leader for this “pack” and lead it toward a safer place where the quality of life and future prospects were better, as her ultimate goal for her children was for them to move up the social ladder. She made her point during her sons' childhood and told them to “be better than us”, as Jaime writes.

**Centripetal and centrifugal forces.** The two households described above are places where centripetal and centrifugal forces as described by Bakhtin (1981, p. 272)

interact. González observed these processes in the borderlands in Arizona and describes them as follows

Centripetal pressures for unification and centrifugal processes of diversity are captured by a multidimensional metaphor that incorporates forces for change as well as forces for maintenance. (2001, p. 130)

By speaking English at home, Jaime's mother developed centrifugal strategies aimed at helping her sons succeed at school and in society at large. Since she went to school until ninth grade, she wanted her sons to graduate from high school and be able to achieve better social and financial positions than she and her husband. On the other hand, Jaime's father was a farm worker who never learned English, as he actually did not need to. In his everyday life, he only interacted with people who spoke Spanish, and never developed a desire to learn English. In that sense, he embodied centripetal forces which call for the maintenance of a language and traditions other than mainstream English.

Sandra's household is even more interesting as both forces conflict in one person: her grandma. She began learning English when her grand-daughter started school, and Sandra remembers seeing her read newspapers in English in an effort to improve her fluency, in an attempt to help her grand-daughter with her homework as she grew older. Here again, the grandma shows her belief in the power of education in English, the language of the dominant society (centrifugal forces). During her interview, Sandra explained that she was going to college “to get a better life”. Through these words, we can see her grandma's influence, making school and education a priority and an exit toward success.



Despite learning and reading English, her Grandma never developed a full fluency in her second language, and kept talking in Spanish to her granddaughter. Two explanations are possible: maybe it was because her proficiency was limited, but it could also be because home is the language of the private sphere, as opposed to school which is in the public space. This resistance to change and persistence in language maintenance is motivated by centripetal forces. Nowadays, she keeps talking to Sandra in Spanish, even though she replies in English.

**New religions offer new frameworks.** When she conducted her study on Mexican American households in Tucson, Arizona, González observed families that had joined Christian evangelical groups (2001, p. 82). As a Hispanic herself, González was aware that there was inside the Hispanic community a movement drifting away from the Catholic church, but she did not realize its importance until she encountered families undergoing the same changes as her own family did. In her interviews, González discovered that Hispanic women converted to Protestantism because of their desire to get a different quality of life, new points of reference they could use in a society that is evolving around them (2001, p. 85).

In his essay, David remembers how he encountered reading and writing and the influence his mother had: “[m]y mother loved to read and write, and as a child I began to develop that relationship with her. I remember her reading the Bible, gaining knowledge, highlighting, and taking notes down”. When asked if this practice has helped him perform better at school, David admits that this close relationship with his mother has been influential in the way he studies. He explained that his mother was born in Mexico, but when she came to the United States, she converted to Pentecostalism. After her

conversion, she spent a lot of time studying and encouraged her children to follow her in her study of the Bible. As we can see here, she did not simply read and learn passages from the Bible, she tried to get answers from the book, to discover hidden meanings and messages.

González noticed the same attitude in one of the mothers she interviewed and detailed her “quest for a template on which to process her family's lives” (2001, p. 85). She explains this quest by the fact that “[t]he reproduction of the models on which she and her husband were raised are inadequate for her. They do not meet the exigencies of the life she feels she must face” (2001, p. 85). David's depiction of his family suggests that indeed, they did not follow a usual path and looked for another “template”. Even though his mother did not know much English, she was able to get a “good stable job” according to David. Instead of having the father working and bringing more money, and the children left with no parental supervision, David's parents decided on another quality of life. As his father was unemployed, the couple decided that he would stay home to take care of the six children the couple was raising. Such a decision is quite unusual in the Hispanic community, where women often appear as the soul of the household, because of their prominent role as mothers, caregivers, counselors, educators, but also active members of the working force.

### **Code-switching**

Code-switching is very common in everyday talk, and for instance Gloria Anzaldua, the most famous Valleyite, has successfully used it in her literature. However, it is not easily accepted in the writing classroom, in grade school as well as in college, where teachers enforce the use of Standard American English as a means of success. In

*Weird English*, Ch'ien advocates for prose that mixes English with other languages or texts that render the phonetic transcription of a dialect. She sees weird English as a political act, a choice made by writers to “form their own language language by combining English with their original language” (2004, p. 6). For Ch'ien, weird English is a tool that has the power to show who the speaker is (2004, p. 8).

Weird English as well as code-switching are useful devices used by speakers and writers to signal their identity, as well as to achieve rhetorical strategies regarding a particular audience.

While code-switching seems to be widely accepted as a speech act in the Rio Grande Valley, there are still dissonant voices saying that it is not an acceptable form of communication as it shows a lack of fluency in either of the languages. Furthermore it is associated with negative values, such as lack of education and low intelligence (Urciuoli, 2003, p. 154). On the other hand, it can signal positive values, such as social identity and be a marker of membership to a group.

While instances of written code-switching remain marginally used in mainstream America, a few instances of code-switching make their way to the English classroom. The two instances that I am going to talk about, and maybe some others elsewhere, have the advantage of existing on paper, and maybe “some of them [will be] taken up by institutionalized patterns of recirculation that promote the forms used in these tropes as stable, normalized targets for future generations” (Agha, 2003, p. 268). What Agha suggests is that before becoming mainstream, some practices were marginalized and generalized only through one-time occurrences, which validated them as acceptable. When accepted once, they became acceptable and made their way into everyday

communication. As the phenomenon propagated, a new standard was created. Although it may seem far-fetched to imagine code-switching becoming normalized in the writing classroom, we have to keep in mind that “[c]odeswitching is part of the inevitable process of language change (Kells, 2004, p. 27).

**Oral code-switching.** When conducting research in South Texas, Kells observed that “more than half of the bilinguals (...) recognize and adopt the label 'Tex-Mex' to define their language practices” (2004, p.25). As a matter of fact, out of the 5 participants of this study, three identify with Tex-Mex. They explain that Tex-Mex is a mix of Spanish and English. The switch from one language to the other at the sentence level (intrasentential code-switching), whatever its length. The two students in my study who did not recognize Tex-Mex as their dialect were Jaime, who spent his childhood in Arizona, and Ana, who just arrived in the United States from Mexico. Jaime speaks English and Spanish but makes an effort not to code-switch because he doesn't like the practice. During his interview he revealed that he thinks “Tex-Mex really is a slang for people who try to speak both languages at the same time”. He then explained that the Spanish spoken in the Valley is not proper Spanish, as words have been made up.

Ana doesn't like code-switching, she says that people speak English or Spanish, but can't do both at the same time. When asked why she thought people in the Valley were doing so, Ana replied:

*Because everybody speaks like that here. I mean, they're constantly switching or they don't even...they don't even have...I don't know but....(sigh) I don't know how to explain...you know, in Mexico there*

*is...there are different...there are .... (sigh)...ah...I don't know how to explain...*

Researcher    There are different social classes?

*Yes. I don't want to see it like that...you know when people is educated they speak in one way...and when people is not...I think we have most of that. And most of the people, most of the people here, living here, come from, Mexican people, come from people who came here because they didn't have no work, no way to get food, the basics there. So you're talking about different people.*

What Ana implies is that Mexicans who migrate to the United States are able to evaluate the social status other immigrants had in Mexico, according to social indexes (Silverstein, 1976) such as their accent. These judgments are often geographically based.

She suggests that code-switching in the Rio Grande Valley, where everybody does it, can still distinguish a speaker in a negative way (Kells, 2004, p. 28). Urciuoli already observed that code-switching could be interpreted by monolingual Anglos as “signs of poverty, poor education, and low intelligence, all routinely associated with 'being Spanish'” (2003, p. 154). Ana's example confirms that it is not only seen negatively by Anglos, but also by Spanish speakers who think that mastering a language is the privilege of the educated and wealthy, and that switching from one language to the other just shows the speaker's lack of fluency in one language or the other, therefore showing a lack of intelligence. Recently arrived in the country, Ana seems to keep thinking according to a societal schema that was used in Mexico, but might not work in the borderlands.

In this section I showed that Ana and Jaime, who are not Valley natives, show their agency in language by choosing not to speak Tex-Mex, and by performing evaluations of people who do. As enunciated earlier, they evaluate their peers on three levels: moral, performance, display of knowledge (Duranti, 2004, p. 454). By doing so, they distance themselves from the community of the Rio Grande Valley, which enables them to criticize the poor quality of their peers' Spanish. Indeed, the language of reference for them is not English, but Spanish, which has to be spoken the way it is in Mexico. For them, speaking “proper Spanish” seems to be an attribute of Hispanic identity. Ana stresses the moral and performance factors as she focuses on social classes and is afraid of being assimilated with people from a lower class. Ana is a very interesting student, as she avoids code-switching in speech, but does it in writing, as we are going to see in the next section.

**Code-switching in writing.** The practice of code-switching in speech has been well studied ( Kells, 2004; Urciuoli, 2003; Myers-Scotton, 1993), however its written usage has been the focus of less attention, especially in the writing classroom, where the use of Standard American English is prescribed.

We can wonder how students who are surrounded by English and Spanish languages and practice code-switching in everyday talk negotiate writing activities in English Composition. Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that “oral language patterns influence writing” (Farr and Tanda, 1985, p. 64), in terms of syntactic choice. Ramírez-Dhoore and Jones argued that students at UTPA “do not see the essay as a format that can incorporate anything besides academic discourse written in Standard American English” (2007, p. 70). However, after reading Anzaldúa, or texts from Kells and Balester, they

have the feeling that “they have the choice of whether or not to cater to the dominant language- by writing in only Spanish, Spanglish, or the language in which they are comfortable” (2007, p.70). Ramírez-Dhoore and Jones complained that this awareness came quite late, only in 4000 level classes. However, I found two students enrolled in first-year composition who code-switched in their drafts.

Barnabas, wrote a paper which focused on peer-revision for his Eng 1301 class. At the end of his draft, he wrote: “All I have to say is that sometimes peer revision can lack connection, motivation to do what is needed and lose its effectiveness. Echalen Ganas!!! my fellow peers”. Ana, on the other hand, produced a paper in which she remembered how her mother, her grandma and her aunt gathered to cook tamales: “I remember those reunions were really fun and delicious because when [we] got hungry, someone there just heated up some tortillas and fill[ed] them with beans and meat (that was from the filing for the tamales) and we all ate, Grand mom had a great sazon!!!”

During the interviews, both Barnabas and Ana were asked about the signification of the words they used, and why they did not use English. Barnabas said that he code-switches when he knows the person he is talking to. He mentioned a neighbor who is also his friend and admitted that they often speak either language or code-switch. However, if Barnabas goes to a store and asks for information in English, and the person in front of him can't find a word in English, he said that he would let that person find another word or way to say what he wants to say, he would not start speaking Spanish or code-switching. He confirms that code-switching is topic-dependent and context-dependent (Kells, 2004, p.32). Depending on the relationship between the speaker and his audience

and the topic of the conversation (usually intimate matters) speakers are going to code-switch.

Ana, who revealed that code-switching when talking was not a form of expression that she liked, said that she did not practice code-switching in writing either. However, we have here an instance of code-switching in a writing class. This can be explained by the positive values associated with code-switching: it can act as a marker of social inclusion (belonging to a group) and index identity (Kells, 2004, p. 36). Indeed, even though these texts were written for their class, and would be read by their teachers, both students thought about their peers when writing their drafts. These students took classes that emphasized peer-revision, and they knew that their Spanish-speaking peers would read their paper in class before their professors who don't speak Spanish. When I asked them if they had thought about their teachers' reaction, they admitted that they had not, as the paper was to be read by their peers, their audience.

Barnabas justified his sentence by saying that it is an expression that his father tells him: “echalen ganas al estudio”, which he translates “keep studying, do your best”. He added that this sentence was meant as an encouragement toward his peers. In this case, Barnabas indexes his identity. Not only he is bilingual and Hispanic, which a lot of his peers are, but he puts on the persona of his father, of someone full of experience wishing to guide and encourage less experienced students through this writing class. Because he is only eighteen years old, Barnabas doesn't have a natural authority to give advice to his peers. However, when using his father's words, he has the feeling that his words have more power and that he is going to be understood by his classmates.



Ana also admitted that she did not think about her teacher when she wrote her paper. She thought about her peers, who as Hispanics, and more particularly Mexicans would understand what “sazon” is. Ana explained that a “sazon” is a personal touch that each cook gives to his meals. Two people following the exact same recipe will not get the same result, will not produce identical dishes, precisely because of this special individual touch that we all have. Her word choice can be explained by the fact that she is a bit older than most of the students in her class (she is thirty-three years old), and as seen earlier, she does not always relate to people in the Valley, as they code-switch, an attitude she condemns. By going against her own principles of code-switching to better communicate with her peers, Ana sends a message saying that she is part of the group, she also belongs to this community, even though she does not agree on everything.

**Role alignment.** We can see here that each student aligned to his or her audience. Barnabas used code-switching as a rhetorical device enabling him to present himself, at least in his head, as an authoritative figure talking to his peers and convincing them to do something, just like his father did with him. Code-switching is used in certain situations, with a certain type of people, usually close friends or relatives. Code-switching implies the idea of a proximity between the writer and his audience. Barnabas tried to recreate a paternal relationship between the author and his readership. He performed a symmetric role alignment, an approach “that seek[s] to strategically align the performed image of speaker with that of target audiences and addressees” (Agha, 2003, p. 268).

It is also what Ana did, when writing with her peers in mind. Her topic, familial gatherings in order to prepare tamales, is an activity that a lot of students have experienced. It represents an opportunity to mix generations together and to learn from

the elders. Her code-switching seemed appropriate, as she was presenting herself as a family member sharing personal details about her dead grandma. In this type of intimate context, code-switching is allowed.

### **Summary**

As demonstrated in this section on code-switching, oral and written code-switching are two separate actions. Oral code-switching is quite often used in everyday conversation. Speakers usually code-switch according to their interlocutor or the topic discussed. While oral code-switching occurs naturally, and seems to take place without the speaker really realizing it, written code-switching has to be considered differently. Besides written code-switching on social websites such as Facebook, which is a reproduction of oral speech, written code-switching doesn't occur purposely in the writing classroom. However, when it is used, it is marked by the intentionality of the writer and serves as a rhetorical and linguistic device.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this study was to discover what voices Hispanic students enrolled in first-year composition classes at the University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA) expressed in their writing. The location of the university is crucial, as it is situated about half an hour away from the Mexican border. Because of this geographical proximity with Mexico, the density of people identifying as Hispanic is higher than in most universities in the United States. For example, 87.9% of undergraduate students enrolled at UTPA identified as Hispanic in 2008. The geographical and linguistic situation of the Rio Grande Valley is unique, just as its population, which is why results found here are important and bring light to behavior and practices that would be harder to notice in other Mexican American communities in the United States. Also, trends and habits taking place in the Valley can serve as a model for other Mexican American communities, as the Hispanic population is growing in numbers throughout the country, and the number of Hispanic students accessing higher education is going to increase.

## Results

Through interviews and careful examination of students' writings, I identified that women in Hispanic households of Mexican descent are major actors in the spreading of literacy practices, and act as providers of language ideologies aimed at ensuring the academic success of their children. They tend to privilege the use of English and reinforce school discourse, in an effort to secure their children a better financial future than the one they have. However, they are caught between a desire to promote success and the respect of traditional values, which can be conveyed by the use of Spanish. Also, mothers tend to be active seekers of ways to adapt to change, and can turn toward Protestantism in order to look for an answer as how to deal with a culture evolving because of its uprooting. This tendency to move away from the usual religious framework and the conflict between the use of English and Spanish which stand as a metaphor for modernity and tradition are centripetal and centrifugal forces that animate Mexican American households in the borderlands.

These results confirm what González (2001) found when she conducted a study of Mexican American households in Tucson, Arizona. The fact that the results are similar show that these practices are shared by Hispanic families in the borderlands, even though these areas are quite different. Tucson's inhabitants are gathered into neighborhoods according to their ethnicity and their socioeconomic status. Code-switching in public settings is not popular because of the strong Anglo presence. On the contrary, code-switching is part of the dialect of the Valley (Tex-Mex) and is a practice shared by people of all social origins. Furthermore, Valleyites share neighborhoods according to their

social status, but there is no ethnic grouping. Anglos form a minority and integrate neighborhoods according to their social status.

I also found that even though oral code-switching can be heard almost everywhere in the Valley, it has its detractors who see it as a sign of poor education and a lack of fluency in English or Spanish. Furthermore, for opponents to code-switching, competency in Spanish and not in English seems to be a way to evaluate one's peers, as there seems to be no excuse for a Mexican American not to know Spanish, a value linked to a common heritage.

Code-switching, a wide spread habit in oral speech, is not at all common in academic settings. However, I found that two students used it as a rhetorical device to communicate with their peers in a writing classroom at a college level. Their use of Spanish words was deliberate and marked a desire for these students to create a symmetric alignment (Agha, 2003, p. 268) with their audience.

### **Limitations of the study**

The main limitation of this study is the limited number of participants. The study was conducted during the second half of the semester, when attendance was low in writing classrooms. If conducted earlier in the semester, more writing samples could have been collected in order to offer more examples to illustrate the findings. Also, more patterns constitutive of the Hispanic identity in households could have been identified.

Furthermore, most subjects in this study are English as a second language speakers. A larger target population could include students identifying as Hispanic, but speaking English only. Even though they do not constitute the majority of the population in the Valley, their voice might generate different results than the one found in this study.

Also, when I recruited participants I looked for students who identified as Hispanic. I should have included students who identify as Mexican-American for a more comprehensive representation of population of the Valley.

### **Implications**

#### **Writing instruction at the University of Texas-Pan American**

Instructors at UTPA come from all horizons: Valley natives as well as Americans from all states. While understanding UTPA's students seems to be easy for Valleyites, it may be harder for other Americans or foreigners. We don't know the history of the area, and its socio-political context. Furthermore speech habits can be a bit disconcerting. After a few months however, hearing people code-switching becomes normal: a feature of the area.

It is important for instructors at UTPA to understand that the Hispanic community is not homogenous. Students coming to class have different experiences, and have been in the United States for different periods of time. Sometimes students born in the United States have also spent several years in Mexico, as their parents moved back to their home country. Therefore they are bilingual, or might not feel comfortable in English even though it was their first language for a few years. Because the Mexican border is so close, a number of students cross the border to go to the big neighboring city of Reynosa to visit friends, family or have fun. Summer trips to visit relatives in Mexico are not rare. Therefore, even though immigrant communities always keep a special spot in their heart and minds for the country of their fathers and ancestors, the ties with Mexico are quite strong thanks to this proximity, which has advantages and drawbacks. A positive side is that Mexico is not far and relatives can be visited. Also, Mexican food specialties (an

item often linked to one's culture) are available in the Valley, even though everybody claims that the quality of food is inferior to the one in Mexico.

Because of the regular influx of Spanish speakers in the Valley, Tex-Mex develops. However, this dialect is not well perceived by English speakers beyond the limits of the Valley. Mexicans, on the other side, reject the variety of Spanish spoken in the Valley and qualify it of “pocho”, a rotten variety of Spanish. This derogatory term implies that speakers of “pocho” have forgotten their language and their roots. They are too Americanized. In this context, and also because it helps for business, speaking good Spanish (meaning the dominant variety spoken in Mexico and not in the borderlands), is perceived positively. However, students don't see this competence as an advantage and don't think about using it outside the Valley, even if they could earn more money by being bilingual.

Afraid of going North, rejected by Mexico, students in the Rio Grande Valley have a “linguistic shame “ (Ramírez-Dhoore and Jones, 2007, p.66) that makes them feel uneasy in the classroom. It is only by understanding this socio-political dynamic that instructors can reassure students about their language practices and abilities. By providing a positive attitude towards the language spoken in the Valley, teachers can help students get rid of their linguistic shame and guilt of not speaking, and therefore writing, the standard forms of English and/or Spanish.

Future instructors coming to the borderlands of South Texas need to be aware that Valleyites are caught between two countries, two languages and two cultures. This particular situation has enabled the formation of a third language and a third culture influenced by both sides of the border. Far from being a place with no culture, the Rio

Grande Valley is actually a place full of vitality and energy where people look for ways to adapt to a new country. They do so by manipulating language, actively acquiring English, while speaking Spanish to resist the loss of their roots and to preserve their heritage. While English is the language of wider communication and the language spoken at school, it does not have the prestige of Spanish among Hispanics of Mexican origin in the Rio Grande Valley.

### **ESL instruction**

The Hispanic community in the U.S. is not fixed in time and practice. Indeed, as already said, Mexican American families do not form a homogenous group. However, it can be said that Hispanic students are at the center of centripetal and centrifugal forces that animate the households. While families show a desire to acquire a new language that is synonymous with academic success, they also have a hard time severing the ties with their first language, because it represents tradition. Even though language is not the only feature of a culture, it is the one that helps people position themselves as members of communities. Depending on parents' roles and attitudes, children of migrating families will acquire English and Spanish or just English.

It is key for ESL teachers to know that women are active in helping their children cope with a new language and do their homework. However, it is also important to note that even though they reinforce the discourse of the school and understand the value of homework, women don't have the tools to help their children, as their own education was often limited.

As shown in this study, paying attention to students' voices is crucial in appreciating them, their culture and questions regarding their new environment. By doing



so, ESL instructors will understand what is going on at their students' homes and assess their needs for a better communication. With the importance of World Englishes growing everyday, ESL instructors need to emphasize communicative competence in the classroom, as opposed to the hegemony of Standard English.

### **For education**

As seen at the beginning of this study, teaching remains a profession in the hands of white people, even though the population of the country is diversifying. As noted earlier, the Rio Grande Valley is an exception, as teachers are predominantly Hispanic. Outside the Valley, however, there is a need for the profession to be more ethnically diverse to better understand students and offer them models they can follow. Indeed, by having first or second generation immigrants becoming teachers, nonmainstream students (usually ESL students) will be able to better relate to the school system. Education might then stop reproducing schemas that enforce Standard American English rather than the varieties of English spoken at home by students. Also, by being in education, culturally diverse instructors could convey the message that education is not reserved to an elite, and will serve as role model for ethnically different students. By doing so, the “students' right to their own language” will become more of a reality as the educational system will better represent different languages as well.

### **Further research**

This study proposed a definition of voice that is a compromise between the classical school of thought and postmodernism. I suggest that using this definition, further research be done to analyze the relationship between the persona and the self(ves) in academic writing. Furthermore, this study raised awareness about code-switching as

an oral and written practice, in a particular geographical context: the borderlands of South Texas. In order to establish if code-switching is really part of the evolution of a language (Kells, 2004, p. 27) in that area, further research has to be done to evaluate the rhetorical value of code-switching in writing classrooms at the University of Texas-Pan American, and other institutions in the Rio Grande Valley.

### **Summary of voices found in writing**

During this research, I found that the voices expressed by Hispanic students in their writings are:

#### 1) Regarding language

- There is a link between orality and the written text. Students use code-switching as a rhetorical device to better communicate with their peers in the writing classroom.

#### 2) Women are active purveyors of language practices.

- They choose to enforce the use of one language in their homes in order to either maintain tradition or to convey values associated with success.

- Women enforce the discourse of the school, which is synonymous of success. However, they have limited resources to make sure their children do their homework and progress. Since they did not attain a high level of education, they lack the right tools to help their children.

#### 3) Religion

- Women are at the center of the life of the household and look for ways to adapt to a new society. A growing number of them convert to evangelical Christianity in a quest for new points of reference, as the world around them is changing.

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## APPENDIX A



## APPENDIX A

## NOTE ON THE USE OF THE TERMS:

## MEXICAN-AMERICANS, HISPANICS, LATINO/AS,

## CHICANO/AS

When doing research for this project, I encountered several terms used to refer to people of Mexican descent living in the United States.

In the introduction of *Latino/a Discourses* (2004), Kells, Balester and Villanueva mentioned the difficulty to find a term that adequately defines the population of South Texas.

Kells, Balester and Villanueva's study took place about a hundred miles north of the Mexican-American border. They noticed that the term used in the region by its inhabitants was *Hispanic*. My study takes place right at the Mexican-American border, where the socio-political context is different. Valleyites prefer being called Mexican-American.

Kells, Balester and Villanueva acknowledged that *Hispanic* is a term used by the U.S. Census bureau which aims at regrouping Spanish-speaking populations under the same banner. The term can imply that Hispanics are “outsiders”, immigrants, others. Instead, Kells, Balester and Villanueva used the term *Latino* as it is “a term more widely adopted by U.S intellectuals, artists, and other groups across the country” (p. 1). Yet they were aware of its limitations, as it did not seem to be inclusive enough (i.e. indigenous populations, people from Spain, etc). People in the Rio Grande Valley don't use the term *Latino*, as they think it refers to people from South America.

As for *Chicano/a*, even though it is used in literature referring to populations of Mexican descent, Valleyites don't seem to know exactly what it means. Some of them associate the term with people living in California, others think it refers to people of Mexican descent born in the United States.

Even though people in the Rio Grande Valley prefer being called *Mexican-American*, I use the term *Hispanic* in this research because it is also a term often used in the Valley, and it is a term more widely used in academic research.

## APPENDIX B

## APPENDIX B

## INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Name	Pseudonym
Age	Place of birth
arrival in the US	Language spoken at home

Do you identify as Latino, Hispanic, Chicano, Mexican American, American of Mexican descent, and what is for you the difference between those terms?

Do you consider that you speak standard American English, Tex-Mex, Tejano, Chicano English, none of these?

Were your parents working in the US? Were they working long hours?

Who took care of you after school? Grandma? Aunts?

What place was given to your studies? Did you get help to finish your homework?

Did you see your parents read? Write? What kind of readings?

Did you read books?

Has anyone in your family gone to college? Why do you go to college?

Do you feel any pressure to graduate?

Do you work besides going to school?

Do you live on your own? Do you have children? Is it hard for you to be able to do everything at the same time?

With who do you speak Spanish? English? Do you code-switch When you talk, with who?

Do you think in Spanish sometimes when you write and then translate into English?

Do you code-switch when you write in general, on Facebook, msn, emails?

*For the two students who code-switched:*

Can you explain why you used Spanish words? Who was your audience for this text?

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Regine Pellicer was born and raised in France. After working for ten years in the insurance industry, she decided to change career and follow a path more in harmony with her own personality.

She obtained her Master's degree in English Literature and Civilization with a specialty in Native American studies from the University of Bordeaux 3 (Bordeaux, France) in 2008. With the intention of furthering her education, she attended Bristol University (England) and the University of Oklahoma (United States) under the aegis of study abroad programs sponsored by University of Bordeaux 3.

Animated by a desire to broaden her horizons and make new challenges, she seized the opportunity to enroll in a Master's program at the University of Texas-Pan American, thanks to yet another partnership implemented by her former university. As part of the agreement between the two universities, she was granted a position as a teaching assistant of freshmen English composition and rhetoric (Eng 1301, Eng 1320 and Eng 1302). She developed her teaching philosophy and pedagogical skills under Dr Jonikka Charlton's mentorship.

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