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**OWNERSHIP OF TEXTS, OWNERSHIP OF LANGUAGE:  
 TWO STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN A STUDENT-RUN CONFERENCE**

Gail Shuck

Email: gshuck@boisestate.edu

**Abstract**

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This paper examines two Generation 1.5 students' experiences participating in a public, student-run conference in which English language learners present papers on their struggles and strengths as multilingual students. In this conference, learners have the opportunity to construct relationships to and between multiple communities through the texts that they produce and present. Such a public forum enables second language learners to develop a sense of ownership—of the production of texts, of the curriculum, and even of the English language itself. Ownership is conceptualized as being located not in any individual writer but in the interplay between the individual and the collective.

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**Introduction**

It happened March 18<sup>th</sup>. It happens at some point every time I teach this course, so I knew it was coming. This semester, March 18<sup>th</sup> was the day everything changed. From then on, the students' commitment to the work of the course would be different. Our roles as novices and experts, as knowledge-receivers and knowledge-makers, would be different. Our very interactions would be different.

On March 18<sup>th</sup>, our English 123 class, a first-year, English-as-a-second-language writing class, was trying to decide on a theme for the public conference they would be holding a month later: the English 123 Conference on Language. Faculty and students—mostly other learners of English—come every semester to hear the students taking English 123 give moving, entertaining, and enlightening presentations about their struggles and strengths as multilingual English speakers. On March 18<sup>th</sup>, we were discussing metaphors that we might work as a conference theme. Every single student in English 123 spoke up, hoping to persuade first their classmates and then the public that learning English is like, among other things, climbing Mt. Everest, holding a prism that shines new light on all of their experiences, seeing the dawn, or opening up a door. Suddenly, a discussion of metaphor became real and rhetorically powerful. It had direct implications for how they wanted to be represented. Ownership of this class activity had changed hands: the conference was now theirs, not mine.

After that day, students became committed to the conference, seeing themselves as having knowledge to share. Until then, they had written first and second drafts of assigned essays, engaged in peer reviews, and thought mostly about completing the assignment rather than about making their writing part of a larger, public conversation. The assignments were primarily teacher-designed, although students had a great deal of choice about the topics for their papers. Hudson (1988) might suggest that such assignments are near the “official, curriculum-

constrained” end of a continuum of control over student writing. Such writing is constrained by the curriculum but is to some degree controlled by individual writers. At the other end of the continuum is “unofficial” writing, which is “beyond the influence of any curricular control” (p. 7). Somewhere in the middle, but nearer the “unofficial” side, is “curriculum-surpassed” writing (Hudson, 1988), which students do in response to a curriculum-driven assignment but with the perception that they fully control their own writing. This kind of release from what students perceive to be, and in many cases clearly are, curricular constraints is an important component of ownership. On March 18<sup>th</sup>, my students surpassed the curriculum.

### **Research Questions and Institutional Context**

At Boise State University, in the coast-less northwestern region of the United States, second language learners of English make up only a small percentage of the student population. Of the approximately 18,000 students, approximately 300 are traditional, student-visa-holding international students. This number includes those from English-dominant nations and those who went to English-medium schools. We have not yet been able to estimate with any accuracy the number of nonnative English-speaking students who do not hold student visas. We do know that 9% of Idaho’s resident children, ages 5-17, speak a language other than English at home. We also know that, of the 10,263 students in Fall 2002 who named their native language on the admission form for the university, 472 students named a language other than English. Of these languages, Spanish was named most often, with Bosnian and Vietnamese named second and third, respectively. How many students are proficient in those languages is unknown.

Boise State offers three programs, in addition to individual tutoring, for English language learners: free, non-credit ESL courses at the Center for Adult Basic Education, a tuition-funded Intensive English Program, also non-credit-bearing, and a sequence of three credit-bearing ESL writing courses—English 121, 122, and 123—intended to prepare English language learners for first-year composition (English 101), which is required of all students regardless of language background. An ESL placement test determines which of these three courses would be the best starting place for ESL students, although many students, particularly U.S. residents, take the “regular” first-year composition placement test and end up taking English 90, Developmental Writing.

In a context such as this, relatively few faculty or staff members have had a great deal of experience working with second language learners. The English 123 Conference on Language was first held as an attempt to allow nonnative English-speaking students’ voices to be heard, but also as an opportunity to raise faculty awareness of the complexity of second language acquisition. Since I became Coordinator of English Language Support Programs for our university three years ago, I have focused much of my administrative attention on building a faculty component of these language support programs, which include faculty development workshops, a resource webpage on ESL issues ([www.boisestate.edu/esl](http://www.boisestate.edu/esl)), and a pilot program to create ESL liaison positions in departments across the university. These efforts are intended to counteract the trend that Matsuda (2004) points out—that second language (L2) issues are regarded as a “special interest,” rather than a reality that can inform pedagogical practices across the curriculum.

As we have come to understand that communication between native and nonnative speakers is not the sole responsibility of the learner, we have begun to ask new L2 acquisition

research questions. Canagarajah (1999) passionately argues that simply handing students linguistic tools places the onus of learning on the student alone and ignores sociopolitical relations between communities and between languages/varieties outside the classroom. It also results in “reducing...people to their language skills” (Leki, 2001, p. 21). Within a sociopolitical perspective on language use and language learning, on the other hand, L2 research and pedagogies are able to focus attention on such phenomena as identity, ownership, and agency (Kramsch, 1993; Widdowson, 1994; Peirce, 1995; Norton, 1997; Singh, 1998; Canagarajah, 1999; Benesch, 2001; Smoke, 2001; Leki, 2001; Kubota, 2003; Norton and Kamal, 2003).

In the English 123 Conference on Language, students’ identities as writers, as multilingual users of English, as university students, as struggling language learners, as advisors, and as family members converge. This public forum enables these students, who are often marginalized by the academic community, to commit “acts of identity” (LePage and Tabouret-Keller, 1985) that they might not otherwise have the opportunity to commit. That is, they actively—through communicative choices—spotlight various parts of their identities in new and shifting configurations. For example, in her conference presentation, one student’s being both a struggling learner of English and the eldest daughter in her family is highlighted in unique ways. Identity is thus an emergent phenomenon: changing in relation to ever-shifting contexts (LePage and Tabouret-Keller, 1985; Thesen, 1997).

This active, socially constructed notion of identity, especially with its concomitant notions of agency and investment (Peirce, 1995), sheds light on how this public conference enables learners to develop ownership—of the production of texts, of the curriculum, even of the English language itself. Drawing on scholarship in rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies, as well as on the responses of my students to the English 123 Conference on Language, this paper examines the notion of ownership as it is negotiated through the conference, specifically through two students’ responses to this once-a-semester event. The following research questions framed the study:

- How did Thanh and Khemara, the two students interviewed for this study, respond to English 123 Conference on Language?
- How does this conference shed light on what students can “own”?
- How might we conceptualize ownership so that it encompasses the communicative practices of nonnative users of a language?
- How do the related notions of ownership and authorship shift for student writers when they have a live audience for their writing? How do the two students in this study conceive of and practice ownership of their writing/presentations?

### **The Participants**

Thanh and Khemara, both of whom immigrated to the United States from Vietnam in the 1990s, were in my English 123 course, Advanced Composition for Foreign Students, in the spring of 2004.<sup>1</sup> Thanh is 19 years old and has lived in the United States since she was 13. Khemara, now 20, has lived here for ten years. Thanh’s first language and primary language of use in the U.S. is Vietnamese. Her interactions in English are limited primarily to her classes. Khemara’s first language was Khmer, or Cambodian (he uses both terms), and he only began to speak Vietnamese when he entered primary school in Vietnam, where he finished the third grade.

He uses a Khmer-dominant combination of Khmer, Vietnamese, and English at home. Both students fall into the category of Generation 1.5 as all of their secondary education has been in the United States and as they are more literate in English than in either of their first languages (Harklau, Losey, and Siegal, 1999).

Both Khemara and Thanh took Developmental Writing (English 90) with a teacher who was understandably concerned about their limited vocabulary and knowledge of English syntax. The teacher had contacted me in order to help her understand how best to help them succeed in her class. We initially set the students up with tutors, but only Thanh continued meeting with her tutor. She also went to the Writing Center frequently and heavily revised her papers. Khemara took considerably less advantage of the resources available for helping him to succeed. At the end of the semester, the English 90 teacher told them that she would allow them to pass only if they took English 123 (ESL writing) before going on to English 101. Both took and passed English 123, although Khemara passed by a slim margin.

This study relies on qualitative methods, particularly participant observation and discourse analysis. In addition to using notes from class discussions and texts that Thanh and Khemara wrote for the class, I also analyze a 90-minute interview I conducted at the end of the semester with both students. Using their written and spoken voices in this way allows me to begin to respond to Leki's (2001) call for L2 writing research to include "students with names who would tell us in their own voices what happened to them for better or worse in writing courses" (p. 17). The theoretical framework I develop here has emerged directly from students' words and actions, and it thus owes its development to them.

### **"Everybody Wants a Piece of It": Ownership as Power and Possession**

The notion of ownership has played a central role in rhetoric, composition, and elementary and secondary literacy development (Edelsky and Smith, 1984; Moorman, Blanton, and McLaughlin, 1994; Lunsford 1999; Greer, 2003). For whole language theorists, ownership is associated with authenticity of purpose (Edelsky and Smith, 1984) and with control over curricular decisions (Hudson, 1988). Teachers and scholars rely heavily on the metaphor of ownership as they describe what students do—or what they would like them to do—in expressions such as "writing for their own purposes," "finding their own voices," etc. Many compositionists similarly value students' discovering purposes for their writing that are not determined by the curriculum. When students take control over and responsibility for their rhetorical choices, we see this as a positive step in their academic literacy development.

The English 123 Conference facilitates this student ownership of texts in a number of ways. On the day that my English 123 students argued about titles, it no longer seemed to matter to them that the conference had simply been a course requirement. Thanh and Khemara recalled that day, noting that all of the students were hoping to have their own language learning experiences be represented. Thanh says:

[I]t change the class. Before, we have our homework assignments that everybody just do it, and turn in. Didn't have like, the power, like—do for their own (??) to say something. But on that day, everybody just want to (?) one of their titles, their own, feel very strong, and then make them (?) to it: "I want to do it. I want to get that topic [title] at the conference." It was very exciting.<sup>2</sup>

Thanh uses the word “power” here in the way that Bourdieu (1977), Hudson (1988), Norton (1997), and others do: she suggests that each student wanted the right to speak. This is related to what Bourdieu (1977) terms “symbolic power,” the degree to which one has the “power to impose reception” (p. 648): “those who speak regard those who listen as worthy to listen and those who listen regard those who speak worthy to speak” (p. 648). In this way, ownership is more than simply about who produces a given text for what reasons; it is about the power of representation. Khemara agrees with Thanh’s assessment, adding, “Everybody want a piece of it.”

As the English 123 students had the chance to choose a conference title, they could see the power of the title to represent their experiences in the way that they wanted to. That representation would be received by people whom the English 123 students regarded as “worthy to listen.” Heath and Branscombe (1985) and Peyton and Reed (1989), among others, have argued that having dyadic written interactions is critical to students’ writing development. This critical role of audience in the development of writing ability is indeed an important part of the English 123 Conference and other public forums for student voices. Here, however, I wish to note that student writers who have real audiences come to see “the limits and possibilities of writing as compared with speaking” (Heath and Branscombe, 1985, p. 17).

The listeners, in turn, had the power to evaluate the students’ presentations, even if not in any kind of formal sense. The students wanted to be heard, but they were also afraid that the audience might respond negatively to mistakes, miscommunication, or even unintended insults. Because the image the students presented to others was at stake, the conference encouraged them to describe their experiences as accurately and articulately as possible. Ownership thus involves a felt sense of students’ power to speak and also their accountability to an audience. This dual power/responsibility component of the conference is evident in the following comment of Thanh’s:

[At the] beginning, I was a little bit scared. I want to tell someone about my feelings. It was a very good feeling when I stand up there. That day, I’m not scared or anything. I feel very good, like, communication very improving...I like it.

For Thanh, it was important both to communicate well and to “tell someone about my feelings.”

### **Ownership as Involvement and Agency**

Thanh’s enjoyment of the conference, and her commitment to making it as good as she could, was clear in one particular choice she made: inviting another one of her instructors to chair one of our class’s panel sessions. Our class had 12 students, all of whom were required to give a presentation as part of a 2- to 4-person panel. Each panel was organized around related topics such as accent and discrimination, code-switching, and particular linguistic difficulties of students from particular language backgrounds. The students on a given panel were responsible for getting someone else, nearly always another member of the class, to chair their session. This semester, I had suggested that, because we often had trouble getting faculty to come, the students might consider personally inviting their other teachers to attend the conference or even to chair a

session. Thanh took it upon herself to invite her Communication 101 (Fundamentals of Public Speaking) instructor to chair her group's session. When asked about this decision, Thanh replied,

I focus on Megan [the instructor] because she's interested in communication, she's good about speech, and I think when she stand up, she will do very good for our group.... I think Megan, she always told me she really interested about second language learner. I think it's very good to invite her, I think she will come. I like to invite her because she want to learn something about second language learner. So I think it's a good opportunity to her to listen to our struggle.

Here we see the aspect of responsibility for a good presentation most clearly (as chair, “[Megan] will do very good for our group”). Near the end of the above excerpt, Thanh also mentions what a good opportunity it was for the *instructor* to listen to Thanh's and her classmates' presentations, positioning herself as speaker and her instructor as worthy listener. By doing so, she actively accepts the power to speak while also recognizing her accountability to an audience. She thus imagines the conference as connected to the world outside the classroom and indeed made it so as she invited Megan to join the conference. As she made this decision, and as she wanted to “fight” for the power to represent herself, Thanh demonstrated a sense of agency, a willingness to act rather than be acted upon. This kind of symbolic power, when wielded widely by speakers of non-prestige languages and varieties, can chip away at the walls dividing the linguistic “haves” from the linguistic “have-nots.”

Khemara's participation in the conference seemed to be less active than Thanh's at first. While he did express more interest in some titles than others, he did not express a particular stake in any one title. He also had a difficult time coming up with a focus for his presentation. Indeed, even his final draft—the actual presentation—discussed several disparate ideas, including what his first ESL teacher was like, why going to Vietnam would be like visiting a foreign country, how little Cambodian he knows how to write, and how much it means to him when people are patient with his limited English. He revised his first draft very little according to most writing teachers' standards, changing the introduction and adding one paragraph in response to my wanting to hear more about his trilingual background.

During the interview, however, Khemara grew increasingly animated as he talked about his revision process, which he considered to be more substantive than I did. In his discussion, he reveals a sense of authority over his writing. He specifically talks about his refusal to do large-scale revision:

All this words, this comments, it's like, “Oh, wow” [sounding disappointed or overwhelmed]...you know and then, but I don't change the paper at all. I make it like, when you say comment? I try to—like the comment you say, “Explain more this,” then I explain that. I don't change the whole paper because—it's like I say, that paper, I write it, it's about me, about my writing. I write that paper so only me understand it. Other people they don't understand that paper.

As he discusses his revision process, it is clear that he has a clear sense of agency in relation to his writing. If he is making conscious choices, even choices we may not feel are effective ones, he owns his writing.

Khemara's commitment to representing his ideas the way he wanted to is evident in his high level of engagement with the revision issue in the interview. This kind of involvement is an important component of ownership. Involvement can be seen both in the students' active participation in the conference itself and in their representations of the event afterwards. On the day they argued about conference titles, more students actively participated in the class discussion than they had in any other previous class period. Nearly every student spoke; their utterances overlapped with each others' considerably; their voices became louder; and they laughed more. More students also spoke up during the practice sessions in the days preceding the conference, giving such feedback as, "Speak louder; no one's gonna hear you!" or (on hearing a student speak in a dramatic voice) "You sound like Shakespeare or something!"

Student involvement in the conference did not stop after the last conference session was over. Every semester, nearly all of the students wrote positive course evaluations and mentioned the conference in particular as one of the most useful things they did in the course. One semester, a student suggested that the whole class go out for dinner after the conference was over. Khemara discussed the conference as the primary topic of his final portfolio. In his cover letter, addressed to me, he wrote:

I personally like to say thank you one more time for the Big Conference and I think others will said the same thing too. The Big Conference help us and other people who attended, to understand us to see how we struggle to learning English, let us express our desire to learn English and help other to understand what we has been through to learn English.

Khemara capitalized "Big Conference" in part as a reference to a distinction I had drawn in class between individual and group draft conferences and the English 123 Conference. In making that initial distinction, I exaggerated the importance or scale of the English 123 Conference by widening my arms and being a bit more dramatic. I may also have used the descriptor "big." Thus, even in this post-Conference representation, Khemara was making an intertextual reference to our class discussion, connecting the conference to the larger world.

Drawing on Hudson's (1988) work on the continuum of control and Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura's (1989) concept of "flow," Abbott (2000) describes moments of high student engagement in an activity—particularly a writing activity—as "flow" experiences. Such experiences are marked by, among other things, mind/body involvement in the experience, a keen awareness of the quality of the performance, and a loss of self-consciousness. The title discussion on March 18<sup>th</sup> had these characteristics. Everyone, including the quietest students in the class, talked on that day. There was, as Abbott puts it, "optimal interaction between the person and the activity within the social context" (2000, p. 56).

Involvement is also evident in the use of linguistic and paralinguistic strategies such as repetition, imagery, constructed dialogue (commonly referred to as reported speech), and expressive phonology (Labov's [1972] term) to create a sense of drama (Tannen, 1989; Shuck, 2001). When Khemara spoke in the interview about how he revised, he was especially involved and dramatic, speaking much more quickly, taking longer turns, and relying on repetition, rhythm, and syllable stress to create a kind of poetry (Shuck, 2001). Here is a brief sample of that poetry:<sup>3</sup>

I try to change what you comment,

you know, like, I give you, like, don't like something?  
 I change a little bit about it  
 so you like about my paper.  
 And you know want to know more?  
 I add more.  
 But if you say something that my paper—"don't do this, that's not how it was"—  
 I say, it's like, "Hey, you not inside my head, OK?"  
 It's like, "*I* write this paper,  
*I* know the paper,  
*I* understand, you know?"

The use of multiple performance strategies—the dialogue (including internal dialogue/reported thought), the triple emphasis on the word “I,” with short S-V or S-V-O structures, and even ending with a nod to the audience (“you know?”)—offer a look at fairly prototypical performance characteristics. More subtle, perhaps, is the duplicated Q/A structure at the beginning of this excerpt: “You, like, don't like something? I change a little bit.... You know want to know more? I add more.” In earlier research (Shuck, 2001), I argued that such performative strategies serve to create a heightened emphasis on the form of talk while also capturing an ideological position. In this case, that position is a view of what constitutes reasonable accommodation to an audience. Khemara's use of these strategies here indicates a strongly felt level of involvement in the conversation and therefore in his expressing his point of view. Even in his post-conference discussion, then, his commitment to that point of view suggests a kind of authority that mirrors his stated claims that his ideas are his own.

### **Who Owns the English Language?**

In the conclusion of his presentation, Khemara extends the notion of ownership from a given piece of writing or class activity, as I have discussed above, to relations between language and language users (see also Widdowson, 1994, and Norton, 1997). Highlighting the dynamism of any language, Widdowson (1994) suggests that, as new users come to transform the shape of the English language, issues of access and privilege rise to the surface. Native-speaker usage—and particularly that of native speakers from English-dominant countries such as the United States or Great Britain—is clearly privileged (see Horner and Trimbur, 2002, for a discussion of the English-Only rhetoric of current college composition practices). Research on English as an international language, particularly in postcolonial communities (e.g., Pennycook, 1998; Singh, 1998; Canagarajah, 1999) challenges this hierarchy in which the languages of “center communities” are valued over the languages of “periphery communities” (Canagarajah, 1999).

Khemara demonstrates an awareness of this global language variation, as well as of the inequities that result for learners of English when this native/nonnative distinction is held dear. In class, he had talked about how terrible it is to have someone ask, “Are you sure you're speaking English?” He referred to such negative evaluations of his English ability obliquely in his presentation by saying, “I know that I don't speak English perfectly, but I am proud that I can speak English.” He goes on in the conclusion to question the very notion of perfect English:



There is no such thing as perfect English, if we are willing to learn and speak English and people who is willing to listening to us. I called it perfect because we gave the best shot of learning and speaking English and people who willing to listen to us make it more perfect than any other English did.

In the interview, he is more explicit about his understanding of internal variation in language:

All I care is that person willing to open up and to open their mind and like understand us, because it's like we are not like perfect English. And then sometimes I wonder, well what is perfect English, you know, it's like here, American they speak English, and British, they speak English, too. And then those two, what English is the right English? This English or that English?

Khemara's suggestion that perfect English is in the listener's attempt to understand constitutes a dramatic departure from a number of beliefs about language: 1) that there is such a thing as perfect English, 2) that only native English speakers speak "the right English," 3) that the responsibility for communication belongs to the speaker, and 4) that the language itself—perfect or not—is the property of particular speakers. For Khemara, "perfect English" is a property of the interaction itself, rather than of a particular speaker. This is a sophisticated alternative to the commonly held, layperson's view of language as a way to express *one's* (individually held) feelings. Rather, it sees language as intrinsically social, a set of communal resources to which any speaker has access.

The title of his paper similarly challenges the native/nonnative distinction: "English Is Not My Second Language." This has two interpretations, both of which Khemara has confirmed. One is that, technically speaking, English is the third language he acquired, after Cambodian and Vietnamese. But the other reading of this title is that, as he puts it in his paper, "English is like my *second native language*" (emphasis added). He asserts that he feels more at home in the U.S. than he would in Vietnam, and he sees English as "so close and so important like *my other two language* Vietnamese and Cambodian" (emphasis added). With this statement, he stakes a claim to English, calling it one of "my" languages.

This statement, along with the previous excerpt, encodes a notion of ownership that accounts for the possibility that members of underrepresented or marginalized groups can employ linguistic resources for their own purposes. As Khemara creates the short performances in the interview, he is drawing on his knowledge of strategies available in American English for creating drama in talk and, in the process, gaining some conversational power—"the power to impose reception" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 648). The content of his claim about "perfect English" supports this as well: as native-speaker listeners are patient with English language learners, they support the language development of the learners, thereby inviting the learners into the community of legitimate language users.

### **The Interplay of the Individual and the Social**

The question of who owns the English language is one that highlights the sociopolitical relationships among language users and members of various discourse communities. Within this environment, it seems critical that a concept such as ownership might serve to rectify inequities based on language use. When second language learners gain authority in settings in which they

have typically been positioned as outsiders, they stand to shift the relations between native and nonnative English speakers. Furthermore, if speakers of non-prestige varieties of a language are recognized to have as much right to a language as speakers of prestige varieties, then that language itself becomes a communal resource, rather than a “target” or a “standard,” the property of some but not of others.

The metaphor of ownership and possession has indeed been critiqued in recent years for not considering the collectiveness of linguistic resources. This metaphor often privileges Western European notions of the unified self, the solitary author of original ideas, and the connection to hierarchical economic systems of private property (Ede and Lunsford, 1990; Moorman, Blanton, and McLaughlin, 1994; Scollon, 1995; Atkinson, 2003; Hyland, 2003; Greer, 2003). Lunsford (1999) succinctly summarizes the dominant ideology of individual authorship as a hierarchical binary: “solitary, original authorship = powerful, privileged, and good; collaborative, shared authorship = ‘uncreative,’ transgressive, and bad, very neatly a ‘crime’ of writing” (p. 530). Indeed, conventions for incorporating and acknowledging sources are often problematic for nonnative English speakers in part because of the assumptions underlying such conventions that the writer’s individual voice must take precedence over the work of published authors (Pennycook, 1996). For writers from non-U.S. (or European American) cultures, understanding U.S. academic citation conventions is difficult at best and dangerous at worst. For one to distinguish one’s own ideas from others’, one must first presume that complete originality is possible. One must then value originality over collaboration, dialogue, and tradition (Greer, 2003).

How are we to reconcile the positive aspects of ownership—student involvement, the power to speak, and more equitable distribution of control of linguistic resources—with such claims that the metaphor of ownership over-privileges the individual at the expense of the social? Willinsky (1994) answers this question by urging teachers to provide opportunities for learners not only to develop a sense of proprietorship, but also to share their work publicly. He suggests that the ownership metaphor does not, contrary to the claims of Moorman, Blanton, and McLaughlin (1994), run counter to the widely accepted premise that literacy is a social practice (e.g., Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Gee, 1991). Rather, ownership is more usefully viewed as located in the interplay between the individual and the collective, the private and the public.

From the field of rhetoric, Lunsford (1999) and Greer (2003) offer similar alternatives to the knowledge-as-individual-property view of ownership. Lunsford (1999) laments the usurping of even collaboratively authored texts by corporate entities, whose primary project is to profit from the ownership of intellectual property: websites, visual images, and even “discoveries” of chemicals found in native plants. However, she notes that communities can develop a sense of agency, acting to protect their communally produced knowledge. Greer (2003) similarly suggests that a new conceptualization of the act of writing may be in order. Rather than viewing it as the activity of an individual author with original ideas, she proposes that we follow the 1930s activist/teacher Meridel LeSueur in seeing writing as “a dialogic reworking of shared resources” (Greer, 2003, p. 612).

What enabled Thanh, Khemara, and others to take over ownership of the conference was a sense of agency in particular relation to the various intersecting groups to which they belonged or did not belong: less advanced second language learners, faculty members, family members, native English speakers, university classmates, etc. This moves beyond a notion of agency as individual practice. Rather, learners have the opportunity to construct relationships to and between multiple communities through the texts that they produce and present. As the students

discussed alternative titles, for example, they examined how each title represented them as a group. One student came up with this suggestion: “The Language Outlaws Speak.” Most of the students rejected it, even those students with a well-developed sense of irony, saying they did not want to be represented as criminals when they were already looked upon with suspicion in U.S. society. It was clear in this discussion that the students were not simply talking about the members of the class but rather about nonnative English speakers and immigrants to the U.S. in general. In rejecting the title, they enacted their role as agents of their own public image.

We can see this intersection of the individual and the social in how Thanh and Khemara saw their role as public speakers. During the interview, I suggested that they were experts. I had told them that I thought the English 123 Conference allowed the students’ identities as multilingual users of English to be valued. Despite their difficulties in English, their struggles to translate for their families, and their self-deprecating remarks about their English, these students are experts at being multilingual. They have experienced far more complex, day-to-day negotiations between multiple discourse communities than most monolingual speakers have. The 123 students are also the experts on their own experiences. The conference highlights that expertise. Thanh seemed to agree. She affirms that

when you stand up there, that’s just only thing that you know, that you know a lot about that topic....They [the listeners] don’t have the same situation like me.

Khemara, on the other hand, was uncomfortable with the term “expert” and chose instead to see himself as an advisor:

I don’t think it’s like expert. I think it’s advice? Advisor? It’s like give people advice about what they expect, you know, for like non English speaker. Sometimes they want more but all they get is like what they see. I try to give them understand about us a little bit more....I can give advice and stuff, but like, an expert, like you have to be really *good* at it, you have to know what you’re talking about. So advice, it’s like you don’t have to know what—you don’t have to know *all*, you know, but you can give people a bit of information to understand about it.

It may be possible to read his response as a deferential move—unwilling to be seen as such an authority. However, if we examine more closely the terms “expert” and “advisor,” a picture of that very social nature of agency appears once again. The word “advisor” necessarily implies the existence of an “advised.” It is an inherently dialogic, relational concept. “Experts,” on the other hand, may indeed be seen as such only in relation to those who might be considered novices or laypersons, but the term entails no particular dialogue with others. Experts *may* share their expertise but are not required to do so by their very definition; advisors are. Both terms entail privilege, responsibility, and agency and could even be seen as primarily located in the individual. Because the “advisor” role is necessarily dialogic, however, it provides support for the present claim that these students have internalized a view of ownership that lies in the interaction between the individual and the social.

## **Conclusion: The Politics of Ownership**

For students from all language backgrounds, having the opportunity to gain ownership of their academic work allows students to begin to disrupt inequitable institutional practices. Usually, these practices position students as empty vessels into which knowledge—held by teachers, published scholars and other authority figures—can be poured (Freire, 1970; Benesch, 1993; Atkinson, 2003). At the local, individual level, students who come to “own” their writing are challenging the hierarchical relationships that usually hold between teachers and students, with teachers usually seen as representatives of the institution and students as initiates who passively follow a curriculum that they had no part in developing. Their taking an active role in shaping writing to suit their own needs marks a significant shift in their authority as writers. In turn, this shift in authority has the potential, at a more societal or global level, to allow students access to institutional and political structures and change their position within those structures.

For students for whom English is an additional language, and especially for students from Generation 1.5, gaining ownership is especially critical. These students are often marginalized within academic communities and treated as problems for their respective institutions. If learners of English can come to own their academic work, they develop a critical sense of agency. Smoke (2001) argues that encouraging students to gain political power is crucial for helping them to integrate into the larger academic community. This is particularly the case with traditionally marginalized and underrepresented populations. Describing her L2 students’ speaking to the Board of Trustees of the City University of New York, Smoke reminds us of how empowering it can be for students to educate others about what matters to them. The English 123 Conference similarly gives students a voice that is often silenced by pro-remediation trends and public and everyday discourse by native speakers about nonnative speakers (Horner and Lu, 1999; McNenny and Fitzgerald, 2001; Shuck, 2001).

Such public forums for students to educate others about language learning complicate the scholarship on “initiation” into an academic community (Bartholomae, 1985; Spack, 1988). Discussions that revolve around questions of whether or not students need to become members of the academic communities in which they participate locally (and occasionally globally) usually characterize students as novices and teachers as experts. In such discussions, students’ symbolic power comes from their having been initiated into the academic community, learning the conventions of that community. When interacting with members of that community from a position of advisor or expert, however, students’ symbolic power comes from a paradigm that sees all members of the community as constructors of knowledge. We must imagine new communities with new possibilities (Kanno and Norton, 2003). For such communities to be constructed in equitable ways, those who have been marginalized must have opportunities to speak. We must also encourage shifts in ideologies of language such that any user of a language, regardless of proficiency level, is considered to be a legitimate speaker/writer. This requires a kind of identification with others—focusing on some principles or attributes that a Self and an Other share (Burke, 1969). The more we can encourage identification as the purpose for communication, the more likely we are to achieve, in Khemara’s words, “perfect English.”

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The course was named before I became a faculty member.

<sup>2</sup> I have only edited the students' comments to the extent that I felt it was necessary to ensure comprehensibility. Question marks in parentheses indicate words that were inaudible on the audiotape. However, it was usually possible to distinguish how many syllables were in the inaudible portion. I used one question mark to represent one syllable.

<sup>3</sup> I have divided his comments into intonation units (Chafe, 1993) to represent the rhythm more clearly. I have also used italics to represent noticeably stressed syllables (where stress or higher volume might not be expected).

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Gail Shuck is Assistant Professor of English and Coordinator of English Language Support Programs at Boise State University, where she teaches ESL writing and applied linguistics. She has published articles in *Language in Society* and the *Journal of Intensive English Studies* and has presented papers at the American Association of Applied Linguistics and the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Her research interests include discourse analysis, second language writing, and ideologies of language. Contact information: Department of English, Boise State University, 1910 University Drive, Boise, ID 83725-1525. Phone: (208) 426-1189. Fax: (208) 426-4373.