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Developing Academic Literacy and Researchers' Identities: The Case of Multilingual Graduate Students

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A growing number of bilingual and multilingual national and international students are enrolling in graduate programs in the United States, creating an urgent need to understand how these writers build knowledge of unfamiliar academic genres and become part of their disciplinary academic communities (Selony, 2014). Such students struggle with specific-to-the-discipline composition of written texts, exerting their agency in new academic tasks, and research identity issues. Following an activity theory framework, this case study investigates how three graduate students with diverse educational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Spanish as L1, L2, and heritage language and English as L1, L2, and dominant language) experienced these processes and overcame obstacles by examining (1) the goals as students' understanding of the research project evolved, (2) the construction of students' identities as researchers, and (3) the impact of goals and identity on their investment in learning. Two end-of-semester interviews and 19 reflections over two semesters were collected. The results of a bottom-up content analysis illustrate how the situated and negotiated nature of the writing process aids multilingual writers' transition to more sophisticated academic writing and builds in them a sense of identity as researchers. These findings can serve as a point of departure for developing instructional frameworks that better guide multilingual writers to successfully navigate academia in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

Graduate students encounter many challenges in higher education, such as working alone, becoming part of a community (Culver & Bertram, 2016), and thinking about career possibilities (MLA's Connected Academics Initiative, 2017). In addition to these challenges, the student population and the specific graduate program impact how students progress in school. The increasing number of bilingual and multilingual national and international

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[1] Authors are placed orthographically but contributed equally.

students in US graduate programs has led to changes in instructional practices to better address how these second language students build knowledge of new genres and become part of their disciplinary academic communities in their second language (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007; Seloni, 2014). Furthermore, these students must become proficient in new academic tasks—specifically, writing research proposals, essays, and journal articles, all of which are novel genres they must master to become well-rounded researchers (Hyland, 2011; Tardy, 2005, 2009).

Although the predominant focus of second language (L2) academic writing research has been historically on text and cognition, studies have also explored the relationship between text and context from an ethnographic perspective. Here, reading and writing are seen as social practices that alter with context, culture, and genre (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), and as such, they are perceived as *academic literacies* linked not only to subjects and disciplines, but also to larger institutional discourses and genres (Lea & Street, 2006 Paltridge, Starfield, & Tardy, 2016). Regarding graduate writing in particular, studies have focused on writers' identity (Hirvela & Blecher, 2001), interactions between students and instructors (Fujioka, 2014), the impact of first language (L1) writing conventions on L2 writing (Gao, 2012), such as the lack of familiarity with the dissertation genre in the L2 (Aspland, 1999), lack of content knowledge (Wang & Yang, 2012), the writer's role as researcher (Cotterall, 2013), writing style (Prince, 2000), resistance to rhetorical moves (Tardy, 2009), and negotiation of academic voice construction (e.g., Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Hyland, 2002). While these studies have provided significant insights into L2 graduate academic literacy (where English is the L2), there have been few investigations into the academic socialization experiences and practices of multilingual writers, for examples as they approach their first research study. Moreover, the few studies working with multilingual graduate academic writers (Belcher & Hirvela, 2005; Casanave, 2002; Seloni, 2008, 2012), have used the term "multilingual writers" to refer to English as a Second Language (ESL) writers who exclusively engage in writing in their L2, not to those who are already highly literate in multiple languages (Gentil, 2011).

Following an activity theory framework, the current study focuses on three high proficiency multilingual graduate students with diverse educational, professional, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Jorge, Spanish as L1 and English as L2; Beatriz, Spanish as a heritage language and English as dominant language; and Carla, English as L1 and Spanish as L2)[2] in a two-semester course—Acquisition of Spanish as a L2—and on how they develop academic literacy. These three graduate students make use of two languages: Spanish, the language of the class, and English, the language of publications they are reading as a result of the globalization of scholarship and the internationalization of higher education institutions (Flowerdew & Li, 2009). The primary aim of this study is to illustrate how participants' articulation of goals (i.e., both short- and long-term goals as well as the reorientation of goals) and the process of identity construction impact their individual trajectories and investment in learning (e.g., content, language, academic writing).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The current study draws primarily on the theoretical perspective of Activity Theory (AT) (Engeström, 1999, 2001, 2008), but it is also informed by theoretical perspectives that describe (1) participation in communities of practice as found in research-academic

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[2] The names of the participants are pseudonyms.

communities (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991); (2) identity as the individual's appropriation of a voice and stance within a particular social group (Hall, 1997); and (3) agency as the by-product of past experiences and the attempt to appropriate knowledge in a given social situation (Wertsch, 1998). These approaches "assume that learning and socialization entail a process of gaining competence and membership in a discourse community" (Morita, 2004, p. 576) in which identity construction and the agency of the subjects play a key role. In this study, the community is constituted by individuals in a Spanish second language acquisition (SLA) course, and socialization in this community includes student–professor as well as student–student interactions. In this section, we first introduce Activity Theory (AT) before explaining the notions of *community of practice*, *identity*, *investment*, and *agency*.

Activity Theory

AT is based on the principle that cognitive development has a cultural and social origin (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Within this framework, an activity is "a form of doing directed to an *object*" (Kuutti, 1996, p. 27), and behind any activity, there is a motive, a biologically or culturally constructed need that guides an individual to carry out a goal-oriented action. In any activity system (see Figure 1), there is a *subject* whose *actions* are connected to the desired *outcome* through the mediation of tools or *artifacts* (Thorne, 2003). It is the realization of actions under certain conditions, or operations, and with specific mediational means that the activity system comes to exist (Lantolf, 2000). Furthermore, individual actions can be classified as either automatic operations (unconscious acts) or conscious processes or orientations (i.e., planned actions guided toward the achievement of a short-term goal) that take place in a minimal meaningful context (Kuutti, 1996, p. 26).

Actions are mediated by *instruments* (e.g., feedback) and by "social mediators" (Engeström, 2008, p. 27), which include the *community* (e.g., the audience) with its understood *rules* (e.g., stages of task) and the *division of labor* (e.g., students' cooperation) in those community settings. Thus, even though students might share in the completion of a similar *object* (e.g., a research article), how each individual accomplishes this diverges not only because of the actions she or he takes, but also based on her or his choice and use of the instruments, rules, and community in which these activities take place.

Previous studies in L2 writing have used AT to examine individual writing and teaching practices (Lee & Mak, 2013; Li, 2013) and interactive and collective endeavors among a student and instructor through an analysis of activity systems (Fujioka, 2014); however, these studies have not addressed the goals (short- and long-term goals and the reorientation of goals) as well as the type of actions that students enact to accomplish the object and outcome. For the purposes of the current study, the focus is on obtaining a more in-depth understanding of the relationships between subject, object, outcome, and community (see Figure 1) within a multilingual graduate classroom.
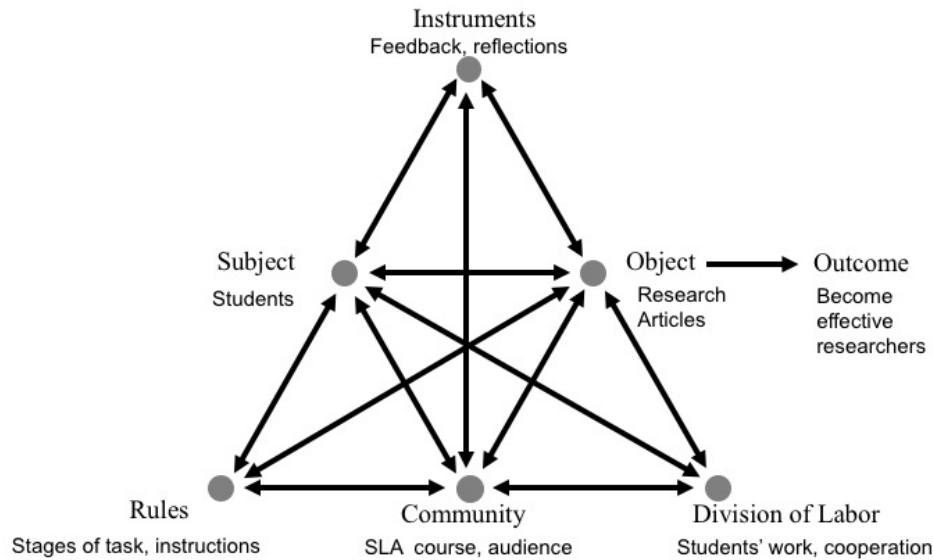
Figure 1. Activity theory model in the SLA classroom
(adapted from Engeström, 1987)

The Community of Practice

Without a doubt, the community is an essential element of the activity system. In a community, particularly in a (graduate) academic community, the practice of writing and researching is seen as a social. As such, it is crucial to recognize that literacy development takes place within the social environment or community. Individuals become part of a community of practice by developing knowledge in areas that are of interest to the community and by engaging with more experienced members of that community to attain specific goals (e.g., to write a research article) (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this setting, newcomers progressively "move toward fuller participation in a given community's activities by interacting with more experienced community members" (Morita, 2004, p. 576). Thus, the community of practice results in learners having the potential to raise their status from novice practitioners to experts. The situated learning that happens in a particular community affects the subject's (writer/researcher) perception of the goals (to successfully accomplish the object) and the actions required to achieve them. Cooperation with other members of the community (e.g., professors, classmates) not only helps individuals accumulate knowledge about their field of study, but also gives them a sense of common identity, allowing them to develop the resources and skills needed to navigate in their community. In conversation with their instructor and peers, these newcomers start identifying their own goals (*mediating artifacts*) and linking their past experiences to their future-imagined identities while also becoming legitimate members of the community of practice—in this case, by developing academic literacy in their field of interest and constructing their own identities as researchers (*expected outcome*).

The notion of the community of practice, however, does not include the learners' potential instability or the inner contradictions of practices (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamaeki, 1999). Contradictions are tensions (e.g., disagreeing with collaborators or struggling with a literature review) between two or more components of the system (Engeström, 2008) that may emerge when learners are working toward the completion of the

object. Rather than being the cause of conflict, contradictions trigger a transformation of the activity system and can be critical to "innovative attempts to change activity" (Engeström, 2001, p. 137). This transformation entails (a) reflective analysis of the existing activity structure, (b) reflective appropriation of existing culturally advanced models and tools, and (c) individual innovation from critical self-reflection (Engeström, 1999). Additionally, individuals' trajectories are shaped by the tension between their previous socialization experiences, their current goals, and the values of the community (Jawitz, 2009). Thus, the interplay between subject, object, and community allows for the mapping of participants' individual trajectories, showing how each of them exerts its agency and explaining how not all newcomers follow the paradigmatic trajectory of participation but nonetheless establish their own relationship with the community.

Identity, Investment, and Agency

Students' development as researchers and academic writers cannot be understood without an examination of how their identities evolve. In early sociolinguistic research, identity was understood as one's relationship with a particular social group (Duff, 2012), and conceptually, identity was examined in terms of fixed and often binary categories (e.g., age, gender, nationality, introverted-extroverted, motivated-unmotivated, etc.) used to explain the nature of the relationship. Recent studies, however, have focused on how individuals make sense of their experiences and how they fluctuate between current and future-imagined identities (Detters, 2011). That is, identity in these studies is conceptualized "not as an essence, but as a positioning" (Hall, 1997, p. 226) in which several—and at times contradicting—descriptors co-exist. For instance, graduate students within an academic community of practice may take on different roles as they perform practices specific to the community, such as the role of the novice (looking from the periphery) when talking to his or her professor about the rationale for his or her study or taking the role of an expert when explaining or discussing the content of a reading to a peer.

We follow Norton's conceptualization of identity: "How a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2013, p. 45). This notion of identity plays an integral role in academic socialization (e.g., Morita, 2004) via the notion of *investment* (effort), which accounts for the dialectical relationship between the processes of identity construction and learning. This concept incorporates how *ideology* (literacy as a social practice) and *capital* (knowledge) interact with the learners' identity and how this interaction influences the learners' agency. In the literature, the notion of investment has been, at times, equated with the notion of motivation. However, as Norton herself states, *investment* departs from motivation in that investment is a sociological rather than a psychological construct, and as such it accounts not only for a learner's desire to learn, but crucially, for how that learner channels his/her desire through participation in a specific set of social practices (e.g., doing an annotated bibliography, discussing with peers, designing a research task) with the understanding that those actions will expand his/her capital. That is, the notion of investment presupposes that when subjects take an action, they are reorganizing who they are and how they relate to their community of practice. Thus, an action can also be seen as an investment in one's own social identity.

In addition to the identity of the subjects and their investment in learning, it is important to address the potential changes in terms of the subjects' agency, which has a direct impact

on the short-term and long-term goals. Agency has been defined as "people's ability to make choices, take control, self-regulate, and thereby pursue their goals as individuals leading, potentially, to personal or social transformation" (Duff, 2012, p. 417). In this sense, one of the distinctive characteristics of agency is that it is enacted locally, and as such, it is constrained or enhanced by the tools available (e.g., access to constructive feedback) and by the features of the environment (e.g., access to research resources) (Wertsch, 1998); that is, agency is manifested in *how* learners choose to invest in learning.

The current case study adds to the literature on academic literacy by examining the tensions and contradictions students experience in the process of learning about new academic genres while conducting a research study. We investigate the development of academic literacy at the graduate level among multilingual learners, a subgroup that has received little attention in existing research. While most of the scholarly literature regarding graduate students' writing development has been set in an L2 context and has been based on the analysis of sample texts, the focus here is on how multilingual writers gain academic literacy. Through the analysis of students' written reflections on their writing and two interviews, we examine how they articulate becoming part of an academic community, and we do so by looking at these students' stated short-term and long-term goals, their reorientation of goals, identity development as researchers, investment, and agency. The following research questions guide this work:

1. What goals (i.e., both short- and long-term goals as well as the reorientation of goals) do these three participants articulate during the process of completing a research study?
2. How do they construct their identity as researchers during the process of completing a research study?
3. How does learners' investment in learning evolve during the research study?

METHODOLOGY

Context

Data were obtained from a two-semester-long graduate-level SLA course. The course was a requirement for both MA and PhD students in Spanish Linguistics. Students took this course during the fall and the spring semester of their first year. Following a task-based approach, students were asked to develop a research proposal in the first semester (including a literature review, research questions, material design, and IRB) and carry out the study in the second semester (including data collection, data analysis, and publishable paper). Because the course was part of an MA/PhD Spanish program, the class was taught in Spanish; however, course readings and the article students wrote were in English due to the ease of finding SLA literature in English and the greater possibility of publishing the articles in a journal with international readership. Publishing in English makes pragmatic sense given that we live in a society in which scholars want to participate at the international level, which usually entails getting published in journals in English (Flowerdew & Li, 2009). The course was led by two of the researchers, one semester each. Both of them were L1 Spanish-L2 English speakers.

Participants

Eight individuals participated in the first SLA course, yet only three students from Spanish Linguistics continued through the second course. The three students, the focal participants in this study, had diverse educational, professional, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Carla was a non-traditional first-year PhD student, an L1 English speaker, and an L2 Spanish speaker. She had a master's degree in education and had been teaching Spanish at the college level for approximately 20 years. Jorge was a first-year PhD student and an English-Spanish bilingual speaker who had recently finished an MA in linguistics and had some experience teaching English as a second language at the university level. Beatriz was a first-year MA student, an L1 English speaker, and a Spanish heritage speaker. She had completed her BA in Spanish and had a few years of experience teaching Spanish at the high school level. Interestingly, all participants felt more confident writing in English than Spanish due to their previous educational experiences: Carla and Beatriz had studied in the United States, and Jorge's MA studies were in another English-speaking country. Despite their high proficiency in both languages, they thought that it was a challenge to read the materials in English and then have to present, write, and take exams in Spanish.

Materials and Procedure

Over the two semesters, students were asked to complete a series of reflections in Spanish outside of class[3]—nine during the first semester and 10 during the second semester—in which they wrote about the process of designing, conducting, and writing their research study (see prompts in Appendix A). Additionally, students completed two semi-structured interviews in English with one of the instructors—one at the beginning and one at the end of the second semester—where they provided an overall summary of their projects and talked about the challenges they faced (see Appendix B).

Analysis

The analysis of the data was primarily qualitative although a quantification of the themes was performed to help understand participants' changes regarding goals, identity, and investment over the course of the two semesters as they completed the research study.

Identification of Themes from the Interview and Reflection

First, the oral interviews were transcribed and the content of both the reflections and interviews were analyzed using a content analysis (Merriam, 2009). Then, all three researchers read the data independently to find emerging themes before coding 50% of the data together until an agreement was obtained. After coding the other 50% separately, raters got together and finalized the coding after agreement was reached.

Following AT, we specifically focus on the themes which best illustrate participants' evolution as researchers: *Short-term goals* (e.g., "This week, I want to keep reading articles"), *Long-term goals* (e.g., "I will try to complement that data with more simultaneous speakers in the fall"), *Reorientation of a goal* (e.g., "It will be a good idea to…focus on another grammatical

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[3] These reflections were translated into English by the researchers.

area that comes out more naturally"), *Identity as a researcher* (e.g., "I need to present it somewhere and I need to get at least a tiny little paper on it"), *Awareness* (e.g., "I had no foundations for this"), *Difficulty/Struggle* (e.g., "Everything in my head is very nice … but when it comes to putting it in words and paper, that's when you know it hits the fan"), *Motivation* (e.g., "I am very interested in code switching and translanguaging"). Figure 2 summarizes these themes in relation to our theoretical frameworks.
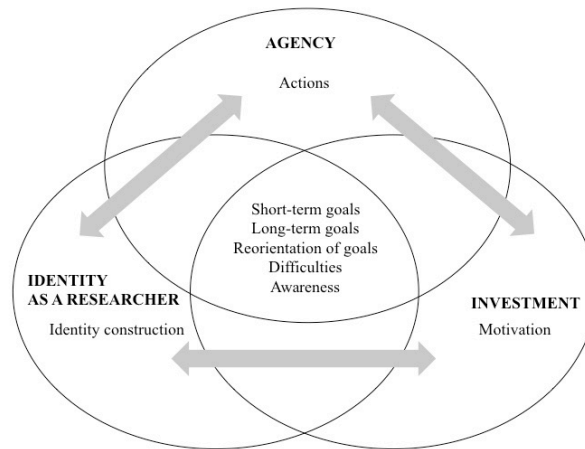

Figure 2. Identified themes

Analysis of Transition in the Students' Comments

To identify the transitions in the student interviews and reflection data, we counted the frequency of occurrences of the identified themes for the reflections and interviews, respectively. The *idea unit*, one or more sentences that identify a content theme such as investment, was used to measure the frequencies. Then, we compared the changes in frequency from the first to second semester using descriptive statistics. To provide a richer description of the participants' transition in goals, identity, and investment, excerpts from reflections and interviews were organized thematically (e.g., goals, identity, motivation, difficulties, awareness, etc.) and reassigned to additional themes when they showed an association to other themes (e.g., goal leading to investment.)

FINDINGS

After coding the interviews and reflections, the occurrence of each theme was counted for each eliciting technique (i.e., reflection or interview), and the frequency of occurrence was calculated for each participant. Overall, participants spoke more in their reflections than in the interviews, a difference likely attributable to the different number and nature of the two eliciting techniques: the reflections were a "free" eliciting technique in that participants could write about any topic they considered relevant, while the interviews were more structured.

Articulation of Goals During Completion of the Research Project

Within an AT perspective, the concept of goal shows how individuals enact their agency and

direct their efforts toward the attainment of the object. Thus, an examination of the individuals' short- and long-term goals, along with how they constantly re-shape them, provides a window into the individuals' re-conceptualization of the object at different times during the process. In some instances, we can even observe how participants articulate their goals beyond the completion of this specific research project and relate them to their goals as graduate students and even as future professionals.

Carla's Goals

During the first semester, around 30% of Carla's comments in both the reflections and the interviews were related to the three types of goals (9 out of 29 and 4 out of 11, respectively). During the second semester, we found that about 49% of Carla's comments in the reflections (18 out of 37) and 67% in the interview (10 out of 15) related to goals.

During the first semester, her focus on short-term goals helped Carla make progress on her project. Even though she was working with two other classmates during the first semester (who did not continue with the second part of the course), her short-term goals had much to do with organizing herself and deciding how to divide the research proposal into a manageable sequence of tasks:

> *We need to edit the IRB now and continue with more details. This weekend, I have as a goal to finish with my minimal part about the bibliography, although I might read other things.* (Reflection 5, 1st semester)

Carla's reflections on the first semester show some of her long-term goals, specifically her plans for the second-semester, which include her ideas regarding data collection (e.g., audio chat) and analysis (e.g., finding LREs):

> *If we keep the audio chat, we would have to transcribe them and analyze them to find the LREs, scaffolding, intersubjectivity, and maybe division of labor. In the discussion board and the drafts, we would see how each person participates and if the collaboration ends in a precise product.* (Reflection 8, 1st semester)

The completion of the research proposal allowed her to have a picture of what she would need to do next. Furthermore, as a student with previous teaching experience, she was concerned about her dissertation topic. During the first interview, she linked the outcomes of the research project to her long-term career goals:

> The writing is what needs the most help, I am unsatisfied with what's going on in my classroom, [...] so I am looking to...try to find something to where students grow a little better as part of the process [...] I just want to explore better ways of teaching writing. (Interview 1)

During the second semester, she focused on short-term goals that related to the different steps she would take in conducting the research, as well as on reorienting her goals so that she could complete the data analysis and finish writing her article in the face of some unexpected difficulties:

…but because they [previous classmates] did not continue with the [second]part of the class, I had to cut the Project to make it more manageable for one person. (Reflection 7, 2ⁿᵈ semester)

In the interview, she again connects the process and the outcomes of the project to her long-term goal as both a graduate student and Spanish professor:

I am looking at things in terms of, how's that gonna help me with comps…how's that will gonna help me get a dissertation written…and you know…what kind of payoff is that gonna have on my future classroom. (Interview 2)

Overall, her goals expanded during the course of the study, allowing her to start thinking about her long-term goals as a doctoral student—more specifically, about areas of interest for her dissertation.

Jorge's Goals

Like Carla, Jorge was enrolled in the PhD program in Spanish Linguistics. During the first semester, around 25% of his comments in both the reflections (7 out of 27) and the interviews (4 out of 17) were related to goals. During the second semester, we found 60% in the reflections (26 out of 43) and 26% in the interview (5 out of 19).

In the reflections, he showed a combination of the three types of goals. Both his short-term and reorientation of goals are linked to the proposal itself, while long-term goals relate to his growth as a graduate student/researcher:

I see this study not only as a project that needs to be developed but also as a way to expand my theoretical and practical foundations. (Reflection 1, 1ˢᵗ semester)

During the first semester, most of his comments focused on how he and his research partner had to reorient some of the goals related to their study, due to the problems they had encountered as the research developed. The problems he described related to the different interests of the two partners. These issues were resolved when Jorge's partner did not continue in the second semester of the course. Like Carla, Jorge also became aware of his strengths and limitations, and this awareness seems to have affected the way in which he constructed his identity and goals. His concern shifted to how best to organize himself. He realized that this was one of his weaknesses, and he put a lot of emphasis on how to solve that problem:

At the moment, this week, I have four days in my calendar to dedicate solely to finish up the project. I hope this would be enough. (Reflection 1, 2ⁿᵈ semester)

In terms of long-term goals, there is a clear contrast with Carla: He was not thinking of his dissertation topic yet; rather, he was concerned about his growth as an academic. He envisioned himself as part of the SLA research community:

I want to be able to write things that are actually interesting and fun to read and you know…exciting…for the community. (Interview 2)

Jorge's goals helped him redirect his efforts not only toward his research study, but toward a more specific goal, that of becoming a serious academic.

Beatriz's Goals

Beatriz's case was different from Carla's and Jorge's in that she was enrolled in the MA program and was not thinking of continuing her studies at the PhD level. During the first semester, 37% of her reflection comments (15 out of 40) and 67% of her interview comments (2 out of 3) were related to goals. During the second semester, we found that 72% of comments in the reflections (26 out of 36) and 40% in the interview (2 out of 5) related to her goals.

Other noticeable differences between Beatriz and the other two participants were her lack of long-term goals outside the research study and the fact that her short-term goals were specific to the design of the research tasks:

> *We want to pilot [task] in the last weeks with two to four students to see if the task is useful, whether we need to create other tasks or whether it is better do something else.* (Reflection 8, 1st semester)

This specificity, which was not present in Jorge or Carla's comments, could be the result of Beatriz working with a classmate who had more experience with research (which was not the case in the other research groups). Consequently, Beatriz seemed to struggle less than the other participants at the beginning of the research project. Led by her more experienced peer, she appeared to be a more mature researcher than she actually was.

> *We also have to keep delimiting our investigation and keep in mind the factors that could affect our study. This week, I am going to keep reading more articles.* (Reflection 8, 1st semester)

This can also be noted in her expressed reorientation of goals that resulted from productive discussions with her research group:

> *But after meeting to talk about our IRB and how we can improve it, I realized we still need to work on some areas. The subjunctive does not come out in a natural way [...] It would be a good idea to make some changes to our IRB and focus on another grammatical area that comes out more naturally [in conversation].* (Reflection 5, 1st semester)

During the second semester, a clear change can be observed. She had to shift from being part of a research group to working alone, which resulted in obvious struggles with the different steps of the project and the subsequent need to reorient her goals.

> *There are some aspects I need to work on. One of them is the theoretical framework I am going to use. I remember we had discussed it last semester, but I have forgotten about it.* (Reflection 1, 2nd semester)

As in the first semester, her short-term goals are specific to the research tasks she had to complete (e.g., creation of materials for data collection, literature review, etc.), but during the second semester, we observed more clearly how these tasks helped her direct her efforts toward the completion of the object, but also how she pulled from every resource she had to complete the research study:

Since I had no experience with data analysis, I had to try to apply the little knowledge I got from a summer course to the collected data in this project. (Reflection 10, 2nd semester)

Beatriz's goals also evolved. Even though she did not share goals directed toward a doctoral program or a dissertation, she was fully committed to the completion of the research project. Needless to say, the results of the data analysis regarding short- and long-term goals showed how both an individual's understanding of the goals and potential outcomes of the research study contribute to the flexibility to reorient goals as the person becomes more invested in the research study.

Participants' Identity Construction

Through our next research question, we sought to understand how participants positioned themselves at different points during the completion of their research studies. The examination of participants' reflections and interviews showed how they co-constructed and negotiated their multiple identities as they gained *capital* and confronted the difficulties they encountered.

Carla's Identity

During the first semester, we found identity to constitute about 25% of the comments from the reflections (7 out of 29), and 27% of comments from the interview (3 out of 11). During the second semester, we found that about 20% of the comments in both the reflections (8 out of 37) and the interview (3 out of 15) were about identity. In addition to the slight decrease in the number of comments in this area from the first to the second semester, the only other change relates to the nature of the comments. In her first-semester reflections, Carla focused on what she needed to do during both semesters, and her identity as a researcher was mainly triggered by her own awareness, whereas in the second semester, she criticized her own study from the position of a more experienced researcher:

But I see that is noticeable that this is a first attempt. When I see the project as a whole and the experience that I had, I think that what is obvious is that the project was too ambitious. (Reflection 10, 2nd semester)

Carla's interview data also showed how several factors influenced her identity as a researcher. At the beginning, she viewed herself as a language educator:

Personally, I've decided on this topic because I feel like in my own career, my own teaching practice, that the writing is what needs the most help; I am unsatisfied with what's going on in my classroom […], so I am looking to…try to find something to where students grow a little better as part of the process. (Interview 1)

Carla's teaching experience influenced the development of her research study. The choice of research topic was motivated by the potential pedagogical implications. Apart from her sense of understanding what a project of this magnitude meant, there were moments in which she became aware of her strengths and limitations as a researcher and academic writer:

It is obvious that I need to apply myself more to elevate the level of writing that I produce. I also need to push myself more in the revision phase, but it is always easier to correct other people's work than mine. (Reflection 9, 2nd semester)

Interestingly, it seems that being aware of her limitations helped foster her identity as a researcher. For example, she mentioned her lack of experience doing research:

Well, mainly they [previous papers] were research and not investigations. I guess that's the biggest difference, because they were always…ok…you know…pick a topic and then write a paper about what is known about that topic, so this is the very first time I have ever done a project where I had to gather data and analyze the data that I get. (Interview 2)

Other times, her identity as a researcher emerged when faced with certain difficulties or when struggling with some aspect of the research study:

It was very frustrating at times, but there was that part of me that sparks and says: I can do this, I just need more experience. (Interview 2)

Interestingly, by emphasizing her identity as a researcher, she viewed overcoming this difficulty as an opportunity and fundamental step in growing as a researcher. In the first semester, her difficulties focused more on how she was unable to take the initiative, but in the second semester, her difficulties related to project development. In dealing with the described difficulties, she had to invest more in the project, and she also gained capital relating to how to conduct a research project in a classroom setting. This indicates that her experiences of difficulty allowed her to further develop her identity as a researcher.

Jorge's Identity

During the first semester, comments about identity constitute 40% of the reflections (11 out of 27) and 0% of the interview responses. During the second semester, we found about 20% of the comments in both the reflections (8 out of 43) and the interview (4 out of 19) related to identity. Similar to Carla, Jorge's strengths and limitations affected his construction of identity. In addition to his lack of organization, which he identified as one of his main limitations, he was particularly conscious of the quality of his writing for academic purposes. Even though he had some experience with literature reviews during his master's program, his confidence in his overall writing diminished:

First, I didn't know that my writing was so bad, the writing style. […] I am not trying to be critical. […] the way I used to write was not publishable…it was publishable in crappy papers, you know like….undergraduate or graduate sort of….but that would never take me anywhere. That's something I found out last term, you know? I thought my writing was better than it actually was. (Jorge, Interview 2)

His concern with not having a strong research foundation and his lack of organizational skills made him more inquisitive; he questioned more what he read and disagreed with it:

I do not agree with the denomination of the acquisition of these speakers as "incomplete." This denotes a structuralist view, and clearly biased by the typical position for which bilingual speakers are compared to monolingual speakers. [...] I think it would be interesting to replicate [the study] with more homogenous groups. (Reflection 1, 1st semester)

He also became aware of the topic he was interested in (i.e., bilingualism) but realized his limits (e.g., data collection) and his lack of a theoretical foundation; nevertheless, through his struggles during the project, he realized that he had improved as a researcher:

At the beginning—last semester—I was not even able to find a theoretical framework and how to use it when developing the project. (Reflection 8, 2nd semester)

Through the second semester, he reflected on himself and analyzed himself and his work frequently, but also talked about how he had evolved as a researcher:

Although I am not very proud of the results, I think it is a good base from which to work, and I might get a small paper out of it. [...] I feel in a position, a bit more of an expert, and with wanting more. (Reflection 9, 2nd semester)

During the second interview, we observed that Jorge had begun to foster his identity as a researcher; this seemed to be connected to what he could potentially do with this project beyond being part of the course requirement. He was thinking about publishing in graduate journals instead of publishing in top-tier journals. Jorge further exhibited his researcher identity by mentioning his hope to contribute to the academic field:

[…] but I have the potential of maybe in the future doing it, something that I don't think I would be able to do before. I thought I would be able to get my PhD but…just a PhD […] now, I want to be able to write things that are actually interesting and fun to read and you know…exciting…for the [academic] community. (Interview 2)

Jorge not only became more confident in his ability in writing, but also more determined to make meaningful contributions. Overall, he had some specific long-term goals, such as publications and presentations, which indicated that he was constructing a researcher identity, but he was picturing his work in terms of future contributions to the field. As he continued his project in the second semester, his comments showed how his investment began to be influenced by his peers and instructors and how receiving feedback from his instructors led to further investment in the project, specifically his revisions:

Well because you know…when you write something…and it's given back to you…and it's like…yeah just think about…write it again…very nicely and politely…so [laugh] is like, OK maybe it wasn't very good, and then you leave it for a week and you do it again and it's like of course…they sent it back, because you read it back and it's like it doesn't make sense. (Interview 2)

As we have seen, this research study helped Jorge not only to reframe and structure his investment, but also to assert his identity as a researcher. In fact, after completing this study, issues of identity in heritage language learners became the topic of his dissertation.

Beatriz's Identity

During the first semester, comments about identity constitute 30% of the reflections (12 out of 40) and 0% of the interview. During the second semester, we found about 17% of the comments in the reflections (6 out of 36) and 60% (3 out of 5) in the interview related to identity.

In her first-semester reflections, Beatriz discussed the literature review and the implications for her study. Despite the lack of long-term goals, the group dynamic in her research team pushed her to articulate her identity as a researcher. She noted the gap in the existing research and how she could contribute to the field:

> *I have seen that there are some studies already done on feedback, and while I was reading I was thinking in the "gap" that I can find to be able to do my investigation, and how this investigation can help my colleagues.* (Reflection 1, 1ˢᵗ semester)

During the second semester, we observed conscious changes in her perception of her research competence. Instead of telling herself that she was incapable of carrying out her research, she affirmed that she was able to do it. Even so, she did not mention her potential role as a researcher outside her study (as was seen with the other two participants):

> *This has made me realize about several things: the investigation is not based on having knowledge about a topic; you need to also know the tools that you need to carry out all the phases of the study in a coherent manner.* (Reflection 10, 2ⁿᵈ semester)

Beatriz's interview data also illustrated how having to carry out a research project by herself in the second semester made her aware of her ability as a researcher:

> I wouldn't say 100% confidence [chuckles], but definitely have more confidence than I did in the beginning. To conduct the research by myself, definitely still I don't feel like I'm there to do it myself. To write an article, yes, but I know there's a lot of room for improvement. (Interview 2)

Although Beatriz showed confidence as a researcher, this confidence diminished when she became aware of the specific areas in which she needed to improve. Her ambivalent perception of her own confidence was also reflected in the gap between her understanding of her ability as a researcher and that of her peers:

> I guess at times I still feel like I still don't know what I'm doing [chuckles], but other people don't see it that way. So it's still kind of, I don't know, I guess seeing confidence in myself. (Interview 2)

She also perceived her own research capability differently than other students did:

> As a linguist, I don't know. I think I'm still [chuckles]—I don't know. I feel like sometimes I just don't think I can do things, so it becomes hard to be like, "Well, you did this. You can do it." It's like, "Okay, I guess I can." (Interview 2)

As in the case of the other participants, we see in Beatriz the interplay between the different factors in the formation of her identity as a researcher (i.e., previous experiences, current goals, and imagined identities). Beatriz's reflections and interviews show that her identity as a researcher evolved regarding the *object* (completion of study), but not in relation to the *outcomes* (i.e., becoming an effective SLA researcher), as was observed in Carla and Jorge's cases.

Participants' Evolution of Investment in Learning

The notion of investment provides a useful framework for understanding the socially and historically constructed relationship among participants' knowledge (resources at a given point in time), their actions, and their evolving social identities. Our data shows that 1) graduate students' goals and identity construction are, on many occasions, mediated by investment to overcome lack of knowledge or difficulties encountered in the process of completing the research project, and 2) learning awareness triggers, at times, participants' investment.

Carla's Investment

During the first semester, 45% of Carla's reflection comments (13 out of 29), and 36% of her interview responses (4 out of 11) concerned investment. During the second semester, we observed a slight decline (11 out of 37 in reflections and 2 out of 15 in the interview). Fundamentally, Carla's reflections revealed that investment during both the first and second semester was primarily triggered by her awareness of the difficulty of the tasks at hand (e.g., difficulty of the topic, difficulty of switching languages) and by her own learning awareness. Her interview, on the other hand, revealed how her investment was primarily triggered by her short-term goals in the first semester but by her long-term goals in the second semester. For instance, she talked about the time her group needed to submit an IRB application:

> *Writing the IRB was something a bit intimidating, especially because we did not know clearly what we are going to do or investigate in this study. We had vague ideas, but they are not formalized yet.* (Reflection 5, 1ˢᵗ semester)

It is her awareness of her lack of goals and capital regarding the concrete nature of her research project that drove her investment in finding ways to overcome the difficulty. In another instance, we saw her struggling to find how different theories could help her articulate her research project. Her awareness of her own learning process allowed her to channel her investment:

> *A challenge that I have now is to find out what from the theory belongs to what I have now in the project: From the sociocultural theory [I have] the ideas about "tools" and "symbols" and that cognition is a mediated action within a social context and that through this process the learner changes his/her external world and at the same time he/she is changed. From activity theory, we have the explanation of the process: the object is to execute a task for the learners to use their knowledge and to grow with one another.* (Reflection 6, 1ˢᵗ semester)

In addition to being driven by the difficulty of the research and her awareness of her own

learning, Carla's investment in the first semester seemed to result from her short-term goals:

> Once again, we did the theory, we read lots of articles, we wrote our IRBs we wrote our tasks for the study and we wrote the rough draft of most of parts of the article that hopefully we would…you know have as a product so it's just all foundation. (Interview 1)

In the second semester, however, Carla was driven by her long-term goal: pass the comprehension exam and write her dissertation. She mentioned that she viewed herself as more goal-oriented because she was older than her classmates:

> I guess I'm in the category of non-traditional student because I am so much older than my classmates... I am sure that helps because you don't waste time… I am looking at things in terms of, how's that gonna help me with comps… how's that gonna help me get a dissertation written… what payoff is that gonna have on my future classroom? I guess have more vision on long terms goals maybe because… where I put my time needs to be where I get the payoff. (Interview 2)

Carla was invested because of her immediate needs to complete the project in the first semester. However, in the second semester, she viewed her investment as a vehicle for a successful career and improvement in her teaching. In short, Carla's investment was dynamic and continued to change as she got more involved in the project and in the doctoral program.

Jorge's Investment

During the first semester, 33% of Jorge's reflection comments (9 out of 27), and 76% of his interview responses (13 out of 17) concerned investment. During the second semester, the ratio dropped to 16% in the reflections (7 out of 43) and to 52% for the interview (10 out of 19). Jorge's investment during the first semester was largely structured by his need to understand the topic of his project. In this sense, his comments during the first semester were exclusively related to how specific readings helped him attain that goal:

> *Now I know historic aspects of the characteristics that, even though they may not be strictly necessary for our study, contextualize much of the aspect to be addressed. […] I have also read several articles that touch on acquisition aspects within the contexts of heritage speakers, in the United States as in Spanish families living in the United Kingdom, focusing on some cases in the 'personal a'.* (Reflection 7, 1st semester)

Relatedly, his encounter with an article triggered his interest, which resulted in increased investment:

> I just get very excited about things so yeah…I started reading about *a personal* and I would end up reading about incomplete acquisition and things that I find really interesting, so that was kind of hard. (Interview 1)

In contrast, during the second semester, the comments revolved around his awareness of how much he learned during the completion of this project and his awareness of his

limitations, allowing us to see how investment intersects with the processes of setting up goals and identity construction:

> *The data analysis is going horribly. This makes me see that 1) I need a statistics class NOW and 2) I have limitations facing numbers and that there are projects I cannot handle on my own.* (Reflection 7, 2nd semester)

The interview data provided additional factors that helped him overcome his limitations. Jorge's interview showed that both interactions with the instructors and the development of his identity as a researcher resulted in further investment. Jorge specifically seems to have struggled with his writing style, and he received feedback targeting how to present his ideas in writing more clearly. As a result, he made efforts and became aware that he was able to improve his writing:

> Well because you know…when you write something…and then they give you comments, and […] you learned that your sentences didn't connect nicely, you learned that you need to have an idea and just develop it nicely and clearly […] so that's what I can sort of do better now and definitely couldn't do before. (Interview 2)

Interestingly, his investment was also influenced by his identity development as a researcher:

> When you present a project, I have started to learn how to organize it, how to get rid of information that does not need to be there, how to provide my audience with information particularly for that audience, which is also, I tend to beat about the bush a lot. (Interview 2)

Overall, as in Carla's case, Jorge's investment developed dynamically as he became more knowledgeable about the topic and the manner in which he could approach the project. In his case, several instances of investment resulted from how he understood his limitations. Rather than becoming frustrated, Jorge channeled these challenges into his investment in the project.

Beatriz's investment

During the first semester, 32% of Beatriz' reflection comments (13 out of 40), and 33% of her interview responses (1 out of 3) concerned investment. During the second semester, we found 11% in reflections (4 out of 36) and 0% in the interview. Like the other two participants, during the first semester, Beatriz's investment was shaped by her need to become familiar with her project's topic and awareness of her limitations:

> *I have never conducted a study, and I see this topic as a good beginning.* (Reflection 2, 1st semester)

Interestingly, her English proficiency, which was higher than her research peers, led to investment in improving the quality of their writing through collaboration:

> Writing in English was not as hard for me as was for my other two partners, because

English to them was the second language. So for me, I was able to like, what I was thinking write it and be able to edit right on the spot, […] it was a little bit difficult for them, especially in the writing process, cause I would look and I would see, I get what you are saying but I think we just need to rephrase it. (Interview 2)

During the second semester, all her comments related to how the completion of different tasks—design of materials, literature search, data analysis—fueled her investment in completing the class assignment:

I feel that the sources that have been more useful has been Journal of Second Language Writing […] The first thing I see is the tile and then the abstract. I feel that the abstract gives me the information that I need to continue or to search for another article. If I find an article that I find useful, I look at the bibliography to see if there are other articles that can help me. (Reflection 9, 2nd semester)

Contrary to Carla and Jorge's investment instances, Beatriz's investment was more localized in the immediate, that is, her investment was triggered as different aspects of the project unfolded. Her investment concentrated almost exclusively on the project, not so much on the course or the program; nonetheless, her investment was equally dynamic because it corresponded to the progress on the project and to her ongoing process of knowledge acquisition. Overall, the results show how both individual and contextual factors potentially contribute to the participants' investment transformation.

DISCUSSION

This study followed three multilingual graduate students over two semesters. The analyses of participants' reflections and interviews from an AT perspective provided a framework for understanding how mediation between the different components of the activity system— instruments, objects, rules, the community, and the division of labor—allowed participants to approach their first research study, develop academic literacy in novel situations, and become part of the SLA research community through their interactions with experts (i.e., professors, peers, and researchers' articles). For example, Jorge's interaction with the texts helped him gain knowledge and understand that his writing style did not meet the expectations of the field, whereas Beatriz's interactions with a more research-experienced student provided her with scaffolding during the first semester.

The participants acknowledged being novice practitioners who evolved into more expert ones. Yet this transition was not easy. At times, the participants felt insecure about their ability to finish the study or about themselves; or they experienced difficulties with certain sections of the project or with the writing itself. As Jorge mentioned:

From the beginning, this project has been a struggle. From an in-depth reading of the literature, which I did not understand at first, to the design of the materials, which at first I did not understand why it was done that way, to the lit review. (Reflection 10, 2nd semester)

Nonetheless, evolving as a researcher was also celebrated. Carla was proud of her study and Jorge felt he liked his field better than before. Cooperation with other members of the community helped them develop knowledge, resources, and skills and gave them a sense of researcher identity. However, at the conceptual level, there were differences between the

paradigmatic and individual trajectories; each participant presented a unique identity and voice within the community (Hall, 1997). In conversation with their professors and peers, these "newcomers" were able to link their past experiences not only to the immediate research study they were conducting, but also to their future-imagined identities as legitimate members of their community. This membership materialized through actions that helped develop their agency and demonstrated their investment. Such actions were clearly signaled in Carla's long-term goals of finding a topic for her dissertation and in Jorge's long-term goals of producing publications and presentations. As Morita (2004) noted, learning and socialization allow for increasing levels of competence and membership within a discourse community in which identity and agency are the priority. In this case, the participants felt comfortable with using both languages although they confirmed that English was their preferred language for academic writing. This highlights an important point: the need to allow graduate students to present their work in English even though they may be part of a Spanish program.

Furthermore, even though previous studies in the field of L2 graduate academic literacy (e.g., Belcher & Hirvela, 2005; Casanave, 2002; Seloni, 2008, 2012) have highlighted the important role of language in academic literacy of ESL writers, the participants in this study barely mentioned language as a contributing factor to their socialization in the research community, to the accuracy and style of their writing, or to the process of becoming a researcher in the SLA field. It is important to note here, that unlike the aforementioned studies, our participants were bilingual speakers with high-level proficiency in both languages, which likely resulted in less focus on the implications of having to use both languages. Instead of focusing on writing conventions and linguistic concerns, then, our participants paid more attention to other processes involved in conducting research: setting goals, developing their identities as researchers, and analyzing their investment in learning.

Our first research question was related to how the participants articulated their goals or reoriented them during the two-semester long research study. The participants' actions were mediated by the academic community of practice, the rules pertaining to how to conduct research and write an article, and the instruments at their disposal. These factors also contributed to students' diverse choices of research topics observed in the current study. The analysis of students' creation and reorientation of goals also revealed their agency, which was observed through self-regulating actions such as making their own choice to complete the project. The participants' agency was enacted locally (at the classroom setting) and was constrained or enhanced by the tools available (e.g., access to data analysis software) and by the features of the environment (e.g., access to research resources). That is, the participants' agency represented actual learning and the empowerment of their personal experiences, enabling them to appropriate knowledge and develop their identities. Finally, their actions and goals were also the result of multiple layers of reflections, such as a reflective analysis of the existing activity structure, reflective appropriation of existing notions regarding research, and individual innovation as a result of critical self-reflection, as suggested by Engeström (1999).

The second research question examined participants' identities. Our analysis revealed that the development of a researcher identity manifests in different ways. At times, their identities evolved due to difficulties in the different phases of the study or conflicts with classmates or professors. At other times, it was participants' own awareness of their lack of expertise in conducting the research itself or in academic literacy that triggered identity development. As previously acknowledged by Detters (2011), the participants also fluctuated between current and future-imagined identities. Their identities developed, as Norton (2013) indicated, in

connection to the world they inhabited and in relation to future possibilities.

The third research question related to how learners' investment in learning evolved over the course of the research study. This idea incorporates how ideology and capital interact with learners' goals and identities and how this interaction influences learners' investment in learning (Norton, 2013). In line with this, the participants became aware of their lack of capital, leading them to identify areas in which they needed to "invest" in order to accomplish their object (research study).

In conclusion, to serve multilingual graduate students better, it is important for students and teachers to acknowledge that language is not the only component to take into consideration (as some multilingual students may not even have an issue with linguistic aspects of the work). Similarly, it is important that students gain academic literacy and be able to complete a research project for publication which is a complex process that students need to comprehend and explore in order to succeed.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Being a graduate student has many challenges, specifically when working with new genres and doing research for the first time in a multilingual academic environment. As seen in the current study, academic literacy is much more than writing a text that resembles those produced in a particular setting; it involves social and cultural contexts and, more specifically, a community of practice. The aim of the present study was to present three interwoven aspects of the development of students into researchers and sophisticated literacy practitioners: agency through actions regarding goals (i.e., short term, long term, and reorientation); identity development; and investment in learning. Through a task-based approach that lasted two semesters, the three participants were able to move from a novice (peripheral) position to a more expert (centered) one. Even though the object (research study and article) and the outcome (becoming better researchers and genre-related writers) were the same for all the participants, they achieved their goals differently through unique agency roles due in part to the community they belonged to and their co-constructed identities, agency, and investment. Using the framework of activity theory and looking through a communities of practice lens, we were able to more closely examine the development of the participants as researchers and academic writers. However, this study focused on specific elements; therefore, other SLA theoretical frameworks such as cognitive approaches would likely provide additional insights into the processing strategies multilingual graduate students use when writing. Thus, future research should look into (multi)literacy issues by examining the textual discourse in conjunction with the writers' knowledge, understanding of academic literacy, and practices via interviews, journals, or academic blogs, in addition to the analysis of learners' writing as a product. Examining both process and product simultaneously would allow researchers to further understand how (multi)lingual writers develop their literacy in each language and in each genre, and how such development is manifested in their final product of writing.

Furthermore, the lack of information regarding L1 and L2 linguistic or writing convention issues is probably the result of the limited number of participants. Future researchers should conduct studies with larger pools of students and with diverse languages (e.g., different alphabets). It is also worth mentioning that other themes emerged from the data regarding the impact of feedback, project phases, textuality, emotions, and learning strategies, which will be explored in a different article.

It is possible to provide some practical guidelines regarding how to foster the development of multilingual graduate students with different knowledge levels and goals and how to promote the complete fulfillment of their potential: (1) address the genres and writing conventions that differ from their own cultural and linguistic experiences; (2) have teaching approaches such as task-based approaches to help students understand the steps needed to complete a research study; (3) train students to act as researchers in their own disciplines (Johns, 1997); (4) create a community of practice, either through group collaboration or peer review, to make it possible for students to understand the object and actions needed to succeed; and (5) include reflection assignments so that students can be aware of their genre-related linguistic and academic literacy gaps, and can develop agency, craft a researcher identity, and invest in the learning of their own disciplines.

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APPENDIX A: REFLECTION PROMPTS

Semester 1	Semester 2
Reflection 1 What problems do you think you will encounter when thinking of a research study? How to choose a 'topic' for the research study?	**Reflection 1** Where do you find yourself in the project?
Reflection 2 Now that you have a project partner, what topics have you discussed for the research study based on the potential studies that the professor recommended?	**Reflection 2** How is the design of the materials/tasks going?
Reflection 3 How did you narrow down the research topic? Explain what you intend to do.	**Reflection 3** What are some of the changes with respect to the first semester? What was the feedback from the professor(s) like?
Reflection 4 Present some of your impressions and opinions about the articles you have already read for the lit review. How do you think they can help with your own project?	**Reflection 4** Where do you find yourself in the project?
Reflection 5 What were the challenges when working with the IRB forms?	**Reflection 5** How is the data collection going?
Reflection 6 Now that you have finished reading all the articles for the literature review, what ideas do you have for your theoretical framework and methodology?	**Reflection 6** How is the bibliography and the theoretical framework going?
Reflection 7 Reflect on the tasks that you are creating/or have created in order to obtain data for your study.	**Reflection 7** How is the data analysis moving along?
Reflection 8 How are you going to analyze the data that you will collect?	**Reflection 8** What is the writing process like?
Reflection 9	**Reflection 9**

Please share your experience with and opinion about working collaboratively to develop a research study (proposal).	What have been the biggest challenges during the completion of this study? What have you learned from this process?
	Reflection 10 Summary, overall comments

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview 1
1. Can you tell me a little bit about your research study?
2. What theoretical framework are you using?
3. What hypothesis do you have about the results of your investigation?
4. Why did you choose this topic?
5. Of what you did last semester, what do you think is going to help you complete the research study this semester?
6. And what aspects of the research design do you feel you developed last semester that are going to help you this semester?
7. How do you go about finding the lit review, that informs your project? How did/do you go about finding relevant sources for your lit review to adequately inform your project?
8. How was your experience working collaboratively?
9. Do you remember any aspect that was especially difficult, and how you solved it?
10. Do you remember any aspect in which you personally felt more comfortable than the rest of your group?
11. What do you feel are going to be the main challenges of the project this semester?

Interview 2
1. Can you summarize your project in five sentences?
2. What theoretical framework did you use? Why?
3. What hypothesis did you have about the results of your investigation? Have you confirmed your hypothesis?
4. Why did you choose this topic?
5. Of what you did last semester, what do you think helped you most to complete the research study this semester?