This paper discursively analyzes two events of gendered positioning that took place during a unit on employment in an adult English as a Second Language program in California. Because the program primarily served Latina immigrant women, the teacher focused in this unit on the needs and goals of full-time homemakers who might want to transition into paid employment. This paper contends that it was the tensions inherent in the teacher’s assumptions about her students’ identities which led to the events of positioning discussed in this paper. In one of these events, a learner contests being positioned as primarily a homemaker; in the other, a more-advanced learner appropriates this positioning to her own ends in the classroom. Arguing that events of language learning and social positioning often occur simultaneously in the L2 classroom, the paper concludes with a discussion of the significance of such events for longer term processes of language socialization.
involves taking on new identities (Norton 2000), then understanding such events of positioning in language-learning contexts is key to making sense of the ‘voices constructed by learners in a target language’ (Ehrlich 1997: 440; cf. Vitanova 2005). Through a critical analysis of classroom discourse (Fairclough 1992; Kumaravadivelu 1999; van Dijk 2001), I explore the following questions: how is social positioning concretely manifested in ESL classroom discourse, and how do social positioning events appear to affect L2 learning in this context? I conclude by arguing that vocational ESL teachers need to provide space for learners’ self-positionings as well as encouragement to question the identities that society is assigning them.

SOCIAL POSITIONING

Wortham defines *social positioning* as ‘an event of identification, in which a recognizable category of identity gets explicitly or implicitly applied to an individual’ (2004: 166). In all social interactions, speakers claim identities for themselves and assign similar or contrasting identities to their interlocutors, a process referred to as the *negotiation* of identities (Blackledge and Pavlenko 2001). For example, Torras (2005) shows how linguistic identities are negotiated through codeswitching in Barcelona, with interlocutors claiming and assigning identities such as ‘monolingual English speaker’ or ‘bilingual Castilian/Catalan speaker’. In the social positioning literature, claiming identities for oneself is often referred to as ‘reflexive positioning’, while assigning identities to others is termed ‘interactive positioning’ (Davies and Harré 1990; Blackledge and Pavlenko 2001).

In the first in-depth theoretical exploration of social positioning, Davies and Harré (1990) connect this phenomenon to participation in discursive practices. Defining *discourse* as ‘an institutionalized use of language and language-like sign systems’ (1990: 45), these authors explore how discourses define the people who use them in terms of subject positions, that is, socially recognizable categories. However, they also emphasize that human beings can make choices in regards to their discursive participation, choices that often stem from an individual’s ‘history as a subjective being, that is, the history of one who has been in multiple positions and engaged in different forms of discourse’ (1990: 48). Thus, even while positioning and being positioned, speakers may remain ‘committed to a pre-existing idea of themselves that they had prior to the interchange’ (1990: 56). However, as Blackledge and Pavlenko point out, ‘In many contexts, certain identities may not be negotiable because people may be positioned in powerful ways which they are unable to resist’ (2001: 250).

A number of recent articles have applied social positioning theory to the analysis of classroom discourse in primary and secondary schools. Davies (2001) explores the constitutive work of language in an Australian physical education class, demonstrating how the adolescent female students supported their male teacher’s gendered positioning by ignoring his mistakes while
tactfully supplying him with information that he lacked. Black (2004), in
a study of a British primary school classroom, examines how the teacher
positioned some pupils as highly competent and others as less competent.
high-school English classes in which particular African-American girls were
positioned by their teachers and classmates as outspoken and disruptive.

Although Norton (2000) and McKay and Wong (1996) argued strongly
that researchers need to examine how learners are ‘both positioned by
relations of power and resistant to that positioning’ (McKay and Wong 1996:
579), few authors have undertaken detailed examinations of positionings in
L2 classrooms. However, two recent ethnographies of high school ESL
learners (Duff 2002; Talmy 2004) do focus closely on learner positioning
students remaining silent in a Canadian social studies classroom, refusing to
answer their teacher’s questions, and thus resisting her attempts to position
them as knowledgeable about Asian cultural traditions. As Duff writes,
‘The students did not take up the identity positions she attributed to them’

Talmy (2004) shows similar positioning in a Hawaiian high school
ESL class, in which Generation 1.5 immigrants who had come to Hawaii
in childhood were positioned as ‘non-native speakers’ and mixed with ‘fresh-
off-the-boat’ (FOB) newcomers. This positioning was exemplified by a class
assignment in which students were asked to prepare presentations on
holidays from ‘your culture’. Demanding the right to present mainstream US
holidays like Christmas, the Generation 1.5 students ridiculed newcomers’
descriptions of ‘exotic’ celebrations in their homelands. Thus, some students
‘resist(ed) being positioned as FOBs by positioning a classmate as one instead,
thereby differentiating themselves from him’ (Talmy 2004: 161). Although
neither Talmy nor Duff followed individual students’ L2 development over
the long term, these learners’ experiences of non-participation, resistance,
or ridicule in classroom contexts where they were positioned as ‘alien’ seem
likely to have long-term consequences for their language socialization in
English (Duff 2002).

IMMIGRANT WOMEN AND L2 SOCIALIZATION

In a review of L2 socialization processes, Watson-Gegeo writes, ‘People learn
languages in social, cultural, and political contexts that constrain the linguis-
tic forms they hear and use and also mark the social significance of linguistic
and cultural forms in various ways’ (2004: 340). While this is certainly
illustrated in the above studies, only Davies (2001) focuses on gender as a
constraining factor in classroom discourse. Nevertheless, gender constraints
in ethnic communities have often been emphasized in ethnographic studies
of immigrant women as English language learners (e.g. Rockhill 1993; Losey
1995; Goldstein 1997).
However, Norton’s work (2000) introduced a new concern with immigrant women’s agency as language learners, as well as a growing emphasis on gender diversity (Cameron 2005) within and between immigrant communities. This trend has continued in more recent ethnographic studies (e.g. Skilton-Sylvester 2002; Menard-Warwick 2004, 2005). In an L2 socialization study, Gordon describes Lao women in Philadelphia ‘negotiating domestic events’ (2004: 446), such as interacting with school personnel and selling used cars. Gordon finds that these events required more complex English than typical immigrant workplaces, and that women’s increasing competence in the language led to family tensions. In another example, Vitanova (2005) details how a Russian former journalist ‘found a voice’ in English through discourses of entrepreneurship and gourmet cooking when she opened a catering business.

This recent research illustrates how immigrant women exercise agency in overcoming the constraints of gender, poverty, and social prejudice that impede language learning. However, these studies, often based on interview data, lack microanalyses of immigrant women’s classroom language learning. There has been little discussion of social positioning in adult ESL classrooms, nor how such positioning may impede or enhance language socialization. Through a discursive analysis of two events of gender positioning in an adult ESL classroom, this paper aims to further the discussion of how educators can facilitate language learners’ (re)construction of voice (Vitanova 2005) following immigration.

**METHODOLOGY**

The events of social positioning analyzed in this paper were taken from a larger critical ethnographic study at the Community English Center (CEC), a California ESL program primarily serving Latina immigrants. The study focused on students’ perspectives as to how larger social contexts shaped their L2 learning and their identities (Menard-Warwick 2004, 2005, 2006). The students knew me as an Anglo-American Spanish-speaking former ESL teacher, who was conducting this research to complete a graduate degree. Serving as a classroom volunteer for seven months, I also conducted twenty hours of audiotaped classroom observations, as well as interviewing eight students and two teachers.

I chose students to observe and interview based partly on the rapport that I had developed with them, and also to represent the demographic range of students at the center. During audiotaped classroom observations, I placed an audiorecorder with a microphone near a particular focal student, and also sat next to her, taking handwritten notes on the interactions. Each observation lasted approximately one hour. I tried not to interact much with the students while I was observing, but I would answer direct questions, and occasionally offered unsolicited help (as illustrated below). I transcribed these audiotapes immediately after each observation. The discourse data analyzed in this paper
was collected in this way, during observations of two different students, conducted about a month apart in the CEC intermediate class.

As I finished collecting data, I began a process of thematic analysis (Bogdan and Biklen 1998). To each segment of data, I assigned one or more thematic codes ranging from ‘grammar’ to ‘cultural traditions’. For example, the excerpt from the interview quoted at the beginning of this article was coded under both ‘work’ and ‘gender’. As I was coding interviews focused on participants’ educational histories, I was struck by the prevalence of what I began to see as ‘social positioning codes’, that is codes referencing salient identity categories: *ethnicity, gender, social class, immigration status, and politics*.

Looking for similar social positioning in the classroom data, I found that gender positioning was ubiquitous on the part of both teachers and students, but that other kinds of social positioning were rare in comparison with the interviews. That is, teachers and students were far more likely to apply gender identity categories, such as ‘mother’, to other individuals (Wortham 2004) than they were to apply categories such as ‘Latino/a’, ‘working class’, or ‘immigrant’.

In this paper, I employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 1992; Kumaravadivelu 1999; van Dijk 2001) to investigate two such events of gender positioning in the classroom. I chose these particular events because they illustrate how two women who are demographically similar may appropriate or contest similar positioning, and because in these examples gender positioning is clearly intertwined with language learning. Taken together, these events illustrate how ‘reflexive positioning’, in which learners’ identity claims are accepted by their interlocutors, tends to foster expanded dialogue and more opportunities for creative language use than does ‘interactive positioning’, in which identities are assigned by interlocutors (Davies and Harré 1990; Blackledge and Pavlenko 2001).

In the following ethnographic microanalysis of classroom interaction discourse (Kumaravadivelu 1999; Duff 2002), I use CDA, as Kumaravadivelu suggests, to ‘shed light on the way power relations work...through a close linguistic analysis of texts within a particular sociopolitical context’ (1999: 466). As Fairclough explains, CDA views discourse(s), institutionalized uses of language (Davies and Harré 1990), as shaped by social structures, but also as socially constitutive, constructing social identities, human relationships, and various kinds of knowledge. In conducting CDA to analyze power relations in particular social settings, van Dijk recommends concentrating on linguistic and paralinguistic structures that ‘can vary as a function of social power... (such as) stress and intonation,’ (2001: 99)—and which are, moreover, relevant to the research questions of a particular study. However, while van Dijk posits that some linguistic structures ‘are grammatically obligatory... and hence irrelevant for a study of social power’ (99), it is precisely these structures that are most subject to learner error, and thus key resources for social positioning in the L2 classroom.

Therefore, in this paper, I focus on the linguistic and interactional structures in Table 1, chosen for their relevance in illustrating social
positioning, and classified according to Fairclough’s three constitutive effects of discourse: identity construction; relationship construction; and knowledge construction. As cited in the table, many of these linguistic resources have also been noted in other discursive studies of social positioning, as well as by CDA theorists, and in more general language and gender studies (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003).3

In interpreting the use of these resources, I attend both to how speakers respond to preceding moves, and also to my own knowledge of the participants based on interviews and informal conversations. Thus, before analyzing these episodes of social positioning, I will share some background information on my focal research participants, Fabiana and Camila, as well as their teacher, Kerrie.
Fabiana

A 34-year-old Peruvian, Fabiana arrived in California with her year-old son in the fall of 2001 to join her husband. Both Fabiana and her husband had earned two-year college degrees in business in Lima. Fabiana’s father had his own pharmaceutical import business. It was successful for many years, but the 1990s downturn of the Peruvian economy had almost destroyed it. Both Fabiana and her husband had worked for the family business, Fabiana steadily for fourteen years until her son was born, performing a variety of administrative tasks. Her husband got laid off as business slid downhill, inciting his move to the United States. In California he worked for a money-wiring office. I chose Fabiana as a focal student because I was interested in the fact that she was comparatively well-educated with lots of professional work experience. Although friendly and talkative in Spanish, she was shy about speaking English, and did not use her L2 for communicative purposes with Spanish-speaking interlocutors, including myself. She generally used English competently in classroom literacy activities, such as vocabulary exercises. Her primary goal for learning English was to find an office job once her son started school.

Camila

A 36-year-old Salvadoran, Camila had lived in California since 1989. She and her husband, an electrician, owned their own small home. Their sixth-grade son and second-grade daughter were born in the United States. After high school in El Salvador, Camila went to one year of teacher’s college, but dropped out due to the war. Camila’s parents were divorced, and her mother had worked as a dressmaker in a Salvadoran city. Camila had little work experience in El Salvador; in the US, she had worked as a babysitter, an assistant in a hair salon, and a stocker in a department store. Unhappy with all of those jobs due to conflicts with bosses and co-workers, she eventually decided to just stay at home. Camila had studied at the CEC for two and a half years. Speaking expressive though not highly grammatical English, she was the most advanced student in the intermediate class. I chose her as a participant because she was outspoken, an accomplished storyteller, and a successful language learner. Her primary goal for learning English was to better communicate with her bilingual children (cf. Menard-Warwick 2004).

Kerrie

The intermediate class teacher, Kerrie, had taught at the CEC since 1989. Anglo-American, she was in her early fifties at the time of the research. Initially she got her TESL certificate before accompanying her husband to Japan for a year in the 1980s, so that she would have ‘something to do’ there. She continued in the field on returning to the US because the
part-time schedules typical of ESL were convenient for her as the mother of young children. Her children were now grown up, but she continued to enjoy teaching, describing her students as ‘good-natured’ and ‘interested in learning’. Kerrie said she made an effort to ask them about their personal goals for English learning, but that she also frequently re-used handouts and activities from previous years.

TWO SOCIAL POSITIONING EVENTS

Latina immigrants who attended the same ESL class, both Camila and Fabiana were full-time homemakers in their mid-thirties with employed spouses and young children. They had both grown up in urban settings and had similar levels of education. They differed in that Camila had lived in the US longer and spoke English more fluently, while Fabiana came from a more upper-middle class background and had enjoyed a career in business. These ‘intra-group differences’ (Cameron 2005: 484) became crucial in the social positioning events analyzed below. In the first event, Fabiana attempted to resist being positioned as a homemaker, while in the second event Camila drew upon shared experiences of housework to build solidarity with female classmates and reinforce her standing as a top student. Taken together, both events illustrate the CDA view of ‘the classroom as a site of struggle ... where ideological, discursive and social forces collide’ (Kumaravadivelu 1999: 475).

‘Fabiana, tell me two skills that you have’

In the interview extract that begins this paper, audiotaped two months after the classroom observation detailed below, Kerrie, the intermediate ESL teacher at the CEC describes her approach to teaching employment skills. She says she focused on convincing the women in her class that home-making activities are marketable. Otherwise, she claims, ‘they all would say, “I can’t do anything...”’ (Interview, 29 January 2003, italics added).

To this end, Kerrie had students fill out a Skills Chart on a handout, putting a check next to listed items. Some of these skills could be seen as stereotypically feminine, such as clean house, cook, and cut hair, while others could be seen as more masculine, such as fix a car. The handout also left some blanks at the bottom for students to add ‘some skills that are not on the list’, as well as space to ‘write three sentences telling what you can do’. Presented with this handout, Fabiana checked off several skills, including clean house, cook, and do math. I stepped out of my observer role to suggest that she add ‘accounting’ at the bottom. She did so, and then wrote ‘buy/sell chemical products’, checking the pronunciation of the phrase with me. After having the students practice the structures ‘can you _____?’ and ‘I can _____’, Kerrie went over the handout with the whole class, directing students in turn to ‘name two skills that you have’. After asking a number of students and receiving answers such as ‘drive a car’,
‘cook’, and ‘garden’, the teacher came to Fabiana, as illustrated in the following field notes excerpt (see Transcription Conventions at the end of the paper).

Audiotaped class observation, 12 November 2002

1 Kerrie: Fabiana, tell me two skills you† have.
2 Fabiana: (0.6) Me?
3 Kerrie: Mmmmm.
4 Fabiana: Mmm:::→ (1.2) I can do::: (0.8) coo†k?
5 Kerrie: You can cook?
6 Fabiana: (.) I can do: (.) buy/sell chemical pro†ducts?
7 Kerrie: You can→
8 Fabiana: Buy? Sell? (.) Chemical pro†ducts?
9 Kerrie: Buy: and sell→
10 Fabiana: ((showing Kerrie her paper)) “Chemical (.) pro†ducts”?
11 Kerrie: Chemical pro†ducts! (.) Wow! (.) So you can buy and sell chemical pro†ducts (.) What are chemical pro†ducts?
12 Fabiana: Uhhh: (1.4) Ace:→ (.) Acetaminophen?
13 Kerrie: Al-sa-phin?
14 Fabiana: (Acetaminophen?) ( ).
15 Researcher: Acetaminophen? Like ty†lenol?
16 Fabiana: Ty†lenol→
17 Kerrie: It’s a med†icine. Pharmaceut†ical (0.8) For health, right?= 19 Fabiana: =(Yes)=
20 Kerrie: =(It’s a) me†icine (.) Was that your ex†perience?
21 Fabiana: Yes†.

Fabiana began in Line 4 by mentioning one of the expected skills, cooking, but made a mistake with the verb phrase, by inserting the auxiliary ‘do’ after ‘can’: ‘I can do cook’. In this case Fabiana’s non-standard use of a ‘grammatically obligatory’ structure (van Dijk 2001) indexed her identity as a learner. In Line 5, the teacher recast this in a question as ‘You can cook?’ with the corrective feedback invoking their relationship as teacher and student (Fairclough 1992). However, Fabiana did not ‘uptake’ the implied correction (Panova and Lyster 2002). Instead in Line 6 she proceeded to her second example, which she had written in the blank at the bottom of her handout. It is interesting to note, based on her interviews, that she had only learned to cook since coming to the United States a year earlier, but that buying and selling chemical products had been her career for fourteen years. Within the discourse of employment being utilized in this class (Fairclough 1992), Fabiana should have potentially been able to claim the subject position ‘businesswoman’. Indeed, she attempted to reflexively position herself in this way (Davies and Harré 1990; Blackledge and Pavlenko 2001). However, she was unsure how to express ‘her skills’ in English, as evidenced by her repetition of her earlier error with ‘do’: ‘I can do buy/sell chemical
products?’ The rising tone at the end of this assertion is a contextualization cue indexing uncertainty (Couper-Kuhlen 2001), a recognition that she is lacking knowledge and power in this interaction (Fairclough 1992; van Dijk 2001).

In replying ‘you can…’, in Line 7 with a flat, continuing intonation, Kerrie provided a contextualization cue (Couper-Kuhlen 2001) to indicate that she had not understood Fabiana’s contribution, and was leaving a blank for her to verbally fill. This fill-in-the-blank intonation further reinforced Kerrie’s teacher identity in relation to Fabiana (Fairclough 1992; van Dijk 2001): not comprehending Fabiana’s attempt to reflexively position herself as ‘businesswoman’, Kerrie interactively repositioned her as ‘language learner’ (Davies and Harré 1990; Blackledge and Pavlenko 2001). In Line 8, both accepting her teacher’s repositioning and also hanging onto her own reflexive positioning as ‘(former) businesswoman’, Fabiana broke her answer into its component parts, using question intonation for each one: ‘Buy? Sell? Chemical products?’ filling in the blank left by the teacher as well as trying to determine which part of her meaning had not been understood. The teacher’s reply in Line 9 with the same flat, ‘continuing’ intonation (‘Buy and se:ll’) indicated that she had still not understood the skill that Fabiana was claiming. The fact that Fabiana’s ‘skill’ and thus her positioning were contrary to the teacher’s assumptions about her students doubtless contributed to this misunderstanding. However, apparently deciding that this might be a pronunciation problem on her own part, Fabiana resorted in Line 10 to written English, showing the teacher her paper, where she had written ‘chemical products’.

Kerrie’s initial response in Line 11 was enthusiastic, ‘wow!’ but she then in Line 12 asked Fabiana to define chemical products: ‘what are chemical products?’ While the ‘wow’ suggested that the teacher was accepting Fabiana’s self-positioning as someone with a valuable skill, her follow-up question was a speech act that reinforced her interactive positioning of Fabiana as ‘learner’ and thus her own power as a teacher (van Dijk 2001). Fabiana in Line 13 interpreted this as a request for an example, responding with an English/Spanish cognate, ‘acetaminophen?’ (the active ingredient in Tylenol). In drawing on the specialized lexis of her former profession, she was claiming an identity as a knowledgeable person (Fairclough 1992; van Dijk 2001). Her rising tone continued to index her uncertainty, although it could also be interpreted as a bid for shared understanding (Couper-Kuhlen 2001; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003). However, through several turns (Lines 14–17), during which I chipped in with my understanding of what Fabiana was saying, Kerrie did not appear to recognize the word acetaminophen. Finally in Line 18 she realized that we were talking about medicine. She then in Line 20 reintroduced the discourse of employment that this class was studying (Fairclough 1992), asking Fabiana if this was her ‘experience’. Fabiana agreed that it was. In this way, Fabiana and the teacher came to some agreement that Fabiana could be positioned
within the classroom discourse as someone with ‘skills’ and ‘experience’. However, Fabiana’s more ambitious attempt to reflexively position herself as ‘businesswoman’ had gotten lost in the teacher’s non-comprehension.

With basic understanding of the meaning established, the teacher then returned to Fabiana’s grammar error:

Again, using an incomplete phrase with an elongated flat tone in Line 22, the teacher left a blank for Fabiana to fill with a correct grammatical form, emphasizing their teacher/student relationship (Fairclough 1992). Again accepting the teacher’s positioning of herself as ‘learner,’ Fabiana recognized this as a request for a grammatical structure. In Line 23, she repeated her earlier error with rising intonation that continued to index her uncertainty: ‘I can do?’ Noting her continued error and continued uncertainty, Kerrie offered her negative feedback in Line 24: ‘No do’. This was followed by explicit correction (Panova and Lyster 2002): ‘Try it. Say “I can”’, a speech act which further indexed Kerrie’s teacher identity (Fairclough 1992; van Dijk 2001). This level of explicitness finally resulted in ‘uptake’ (Panova and Lyster 2002) on Fabiana’s part in Lines 25–29, although she continued using a rising tone for this structure (‘I can?’), while breaking the rest of the statement about her work experience into its component verb and noun phrases. Her falling tone on each of these phrases offered a contextualization cue (Couper-Kuhlen 2001) to indicate her growing confidence with this vocabulary. However, her lack of a sentential intonation contour indicated that she was not yet confident with the syntactic structure she was using, and this prompted the teacher to reinforce each of her words with ‘Uh huh’.

Furthermore, in Lines 30–32, the teacher corrected her use of the phrase ‘chemical products,’ suggesting that ‘medicine’ or ‘pharmaceuticals’ would be
more suitable, and defining these as ‘things you get at the pharmacy’. In fact, the chemicals that Fabiana’s father imported were the raw ingredients used for making medicines, but her inability to explain this in English undermined her claims of knowledge and thus her power in the interaction (Fairclough 1992). Lacking vocabulary, she did not attempt to resist Kerrie’s assumptions about her background, or to further reflexively position herself in ways congruent with her ‘pre-existing idea of (herself) that (she) had prior to the interchange’ (Davies and Harré 1990: 56). To this extent, she was complicit with Kerrie’s positioning of her.

In Lines 32–35 Kerrie steered the encounter back into the general discourse of employment (Fairclough 1992) that the class was studying. Training was the next topic in the employment unit, so the teacher asked Fabiana to address this. When Fabiana proved unable to do so, Kerrie in Lines 37–38 said they would talk more about ‘that’ next week. She ended by praising Fabiana (‘good for you’), a speech act that reinforced her powerful position as teacher and Fabiana’s comparative lack of power as learner (Fairclough 1992; van Dijk 2001; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003). Concluding this interaction, Kerrie went on to the next student, again asking ‘what are your skills?’ It was two months later when Kerrie told me that ‘all (her students) would say, ‘I can’t do anything except clean my house and take care of kids and cook or sew’’ (italics added). Thus, the interaction represents a missed opportunity for Kerrie to re-think her assumptions and re-work her employment curriculum to better reflect the aspirations of her students.

‘Camila, what do they say for number 4?’

The following activity was observed later in the employment unit, when I was observing Camila. In this lesson, students were matching pictures of occupations to statements that workers in that occupation might say (e.g. matching a picture of a hairdresser with ‘how much do you want me to cut your hair?’). When Kerrie and I looked at the handout together during her interview, she told me that she had chosen this activity ‘Partly just for fun, partly to see if they can match what a person says with their job, if they really understand what that job entails.’ She added (approvingly) that there was some ambiguity in the exercise, that there wasn’t always one correct answer. It was this ambiguity that left room for the social positioning events below.

In the following set of data excerpts, Camila appeared to develop greater understanding of a basic (but tricky) English verb, and to employ this understanding to build gender solidarity and reinforce her own position as the most advanced student in the classroom. Before the passage begins, Camila and Pilar (a younger Mexican woman), had been comparing their answers, and had disagreed on which occupation to match to statement number 4: ‘I am so bored making the same thing every day’. Pilar argued for
the electronics factory worker, while Camila contended that it had to be the security guard. Camila told me later that in considering electronics work, she was thinking about her husband’s experience as an electrician: ‘Yeah, it’s like my husband, teacher’. Camila’s husband’s work was quite varied, and she assumed that electronics factory workers likewise had the chance to assemble a variety of electrical products. In contrast, the security guards she saw around town all looked bored, in her opinion. After going over the rest of the handout and agreeing on the other answers, Pilar and Camila then consulted their teacher.

Audiotaped classroom observation, 3 December 2002

39 Camila: Teacher, finished.
40 Kerrie: (1.8) You and Pilar agree†?
41 Camila: No†.
42 Kerrie: You don’t agree! (. ) Aha!
43 Pilar: (1.0) Because (. ) I think for me? I think electronics factory
44 is boring, and they say: →.
45 Camila: No†.
46 Kerrie: (0.8) Camila, what do they say for number 4?
47 Camila: Security guard.
48 Kerrie: What do they say?
49 Camila: ((reading)) I’m so bored making the same thing everyday.
50 Kerrie: What does the security guard make?
51 Camila: (0.5) Just look for the people. Nothing (. ) He don’t make
52 nothing (. ) He, he just→
53 Kerrie: Read that again→
54 Camila: (0.5) Answer for making the same thing† ((tone of
55 enlightenment)) (. ) I was thinking about the (. ) this†, one
56 ((pointing to the picture of the maid)). The maid†.
57 Kerrie: OK.
58 Camila: Because she made beds† (. ) Everyday.

Judging from her ‘Aha!’ in Line 42, the teacher seemed pleased that there was controversy between Camila and Pilar. From the point of view of an ESL teacher, disagreement leads to a livelier interaction and more speaking practice. However, she also took the opportunity to reinforce her teacher identity (Fairclough 1992) in Lines 46–53, through pointing out to Camila a linguistic detail of Number 4: the word ‘making’. The Spanish verb hacer translates into English as both ‘make’ and ‘do’. This leads to confusion on the part of many learners, as when the teacher asked in Line 50, ‘What does the security guard make?’ and Camila replied in Lines 51–52, ‘Nothing. He don’t make nothing’. Camila’s answer makes more sense in Standard English if ‘do’ is substituted for ‘make’ in both the question and the answer. This is another example where non-standard use of a ‘grammatically obligatory structure’
becomes relevant to the analysis of social power in interaction, contrary to van Dijk’s contention (2001: 99). The teacher identified the source of Camila’s confusion and successfully elicited a self-correction in Lines 54–58 (Panova and Lyster 2002). Very quickly Camila noticed her own problem with the word ‘make’. She switched her answer for number 4 to an occupation that unequivocally makes something: a maid makes beds. This was not the answer the teacher would have chosen (she admitted to the class much later that she was thinking of ‘factory worker’), but in saying ‘OK’, she indicated that she was willing to accept ‘maid’ as a possible answer. While Kerrie had invoked her teacher identity in correcting linguistic errors, she did not question Camila’s knowledge of occupational duties (Fairclough 1992).

The teacher then asked Camila to work with Tomasa, a Guatemalan in her 30s. They went over all their answers and found themselves in agreement, especially on ‘maid’ as the answer for number 4. The teacher next brought over Eladio, a Mexican man in his twenties, to compare answers with the two women. It should be noted that Eladio’s answer, ‘factory worker’, was the answer that the teacher later admitted she herself would have chosen. However, at this point, she was still encouraging students to practice English through attempting to resolve their disagreements.

59 Kerrie: All right (0.8) let’s see, you have factory worker, you have maid, so number 4, you two disagree? (1.0) So (. ) can you explain why you have maid?
60 Eladio: Maid (. ) maid (. ) maid (. ) all people put maid (. ).
61 Camila: Which one do you have?
62 Eladio: I put (. ) electronics factory work (. ) er.
63 Camila: Why?
64 Eladio: Why (. ) because (0.6) somebody working in the (0.6) ¿cómo se dice, fábrica?
65 How do you say it, factory?
66 Camila: Fabric-
67 Tomasa: Fabric-
68 =In the fabric.
69 Eladio: The fabric? OK:::→ (0.5) uh (. ) For example, make (. ) make TV’s?
70 Camila: Mmmmm (. ).
71 Eladio: All day (0.5) make (. ) same thing.
72 (1.0)
73 Tomasa: Electronic factory work (0.8) Este es lo que tenía primero.
74 This is what I had first.
76 Camila: (0.8) Because the the secret word is making.
77 Tomasa: Mmmhhmm.
78 Camila: She making the beds (. )
In Line 62 Eladio states his observation that in this class full of women, most had chosen ‘maid’ as the occupation most characterized by boredom. I don’t know if Eladio had personal experience as a factory worker, but despite vocabulary difficulties, he was able to use his English in Lines 66–73 to stake a claim to knowledge on this topic (Fairclough 1992; Black 2004), explaining to Camila and Tomasa in Lines 71–73 that electronics factory workers are required to produce the same item over and over again: ‘For example, make…make TVs?…All day make same thing’. His rising tone on ‘make TVs’ appeared to index a bid for agreement (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003), rather than any lack of confidence in his argument (Couper-Kuhlen 2001), and Camila’s ‘Mmhmm’ in Line 72 indicated her willingness to agree that making TVs is something that factory workers do. The falling intonation on same that brought Eladio’s argument to a conclusion in Line 73 indicated his certainty of the correctness of this proposition, and his concomitant sense of power in this interaction (van Dijk 2001). Thus Eladio reflexively positioned himself as someone knowledgeable about factory work, and the pause after his statement suggests that the women were for the moment willing to entertain his positioning. Indeed, Eladio’s reasoning began to sway Tomasa in Lines 75–79. Noting that she had had this answer before, she implied that Eladio’s answer was at least possible. Employing Spanish in this context, she appeared to be using her L1 as a cognitive tool to reflect on her L2 answer (Swain and Lapkin 1998).

However, perhaps because of Camila’s conviction that electronics work was intrinsically varied and interesting, and perhaps because of a desire to maintain her position as the most skilled English speaker among the students, Camila in Lines 80–82 was not willing to let go of the linguistic insight that led her to choose maid in the first place: ‘Because the secret word is making….She making the beds’. Here she reinforced Tomasa’s decision to change her answer from factory worker to maid. Eladio had used this same word ‘make’ to describe factory work, but Camila seemed now unwilling to accept his reflexive positioning as an authority on factory work. Moreover, in constructing an argument on linguistic grounds, and thus making a claim to superior knowledge of English (Fairclough 1992; Black 2004), she reinforced her positioning as ‘most competent student’. In the next passage, as relationships of gender solidarity began to be co-constructed (Fairclough 1992; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003), Eladio’s position further eroded:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>83</td>
<td>Tomasae</td>
<td>Make†, make es hace:†r.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84</td>
<td>Eladio</td>
<td>Sí, sí→ () Yo sé, pero→</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>Tommya</td>
<td>Yes, yes→ ()I know, but→</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87</td>
<td>Tomasae</td>
<td>Entonces→</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88</td>
<td>Tommya</td>
<td>So→</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tomasa began in Line 83 by repeating Camila’s linguistic argument, explaining to Eladio something he already knew: the English word ‘make’ is translated in Spanish as ‘hacer’. Negotiating linguistic identities (Torras 2005), she interactively positioned Eladio as an incompetent speaker of English, undermining any authority he might have claimed in positioning...
himself as knowledgeable about factory work. Apparently accepting this identity as ‘incompetent English speaker’ (Fairclough 1992; Torras 2005), Eladio in Line 85 switched to Spanish in an attempt to maintain the knowledgeable position he had earlier claimed. Additionally, like Tomasa earlier, he appeared to be using his L1 as a cognitive tool (Swain and Lapkin 1998) in an attempt to resolve his current academic and social difficulties. His Spanish-language question in Line 89, ‘How can I explain to her?’ suggests that as a knowledgeable person he had the responsibility to explain. However, in framing this as a question, Eladio acknowledged the difficulty of this task, then re-stated this difficulty as an impossibility: ‘I can’t explain’. His emphasis and rising tone on the first syllable of ‘ella (her)’ indexed how gender was becoming salient in this interaction. As the women began laughingly (mockingly?) to encourage his efforts, he continued struggling in line 95 to frame his argument in Spanish: ‘OK. Make…puede ser, usted hace (can be, you make)’. His continuing intonation on the final word ‘hace’ was a contextualization cue indicating that he was not finished with his argument (Couper-Kuhlen 2001; van Dijk 2001), while the women’s laughter constructed a teasing relationship that minimized his power in the interaction (Fairclough 1992; Leander 2002).

As Eladio paused, Tomasa in Line 97 seized power by interrupting (Kumaravadivelu 1999; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003), and when he started speaking again, she interrupted him again. Using English, she was negotiating a linguistic identity as a competent bilingual (Torras 2005). In Line 100, with a strong falling intonation as a contextualization cue to index authority (Couper-Kuhlen 2001; van Dijk 2001), Tomasa repeated the word ‘make’, which they had all agreed was important in answering the question. Then, positioning herself as knowledgeable (Fairclough 1992; Black 2004), she went on in Lines 102–112 to explain the repetitive nature of maids’ work: ‘Make in the morning, make un bed, make the…Make the beds. Clean the bathroom. …Pass the vacuum. Clean the mirrors. Everyday. Everyday’. Positioning herself as knowledgeable, she interactively positioned Eladio as someone ignorant of the repetitive nature of housecleaning. This was reinforced by Camila in Lines 103 and 108, when she emphatically repeated ‘the beds’ to index her strong agreement, then added ‘pass the vacuum’, which was similarly repeated by Tomasa. In Line 109, Grethel, a Peruvian woman sitting nearby, began backchanneling agreement, and in Line 114 she joined in the argument: ‘Everyday clean the desk’. The rising tone on key words (bathroom, vacuum, mirrors, desk) indicated that these were items in an (incomplete) list. Thus, in adding to the list of tasks that Tomasa and Camila were constructing, Grethel reinforced the positioning of her female classmates as authorities on cleaning, as well as their positioning of Eladio as incompetent. The women’s agreement on the nature of housework constructed a relationship of solidarity and thus discursive power in this interaction (Fairclough 1992).
The gendered nature of this positioning is not indexed linguistically (as it was earlier by Eladio) but can be inferred from the genders of the interlocutors and the stereotypically feminine nature of maid’s work (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003). Moreover, the women undertook this positioning very forcefully, enacting the repetitive nature of the work by repeating the names of the tasks over and over again, often echoing each other, at times speaking in unison, and putting strong emphasis on key words (van Dijk 2001), as when Tomasa summed up the argument in Line 115 by saying, ‘Everyday the same thing, that’s why the work is boring’. Eladio’s final contribution to the interaction, a stuttered ‘Uh but uh’, confirmed as much as it contested their positioning of him as incompetent. As they interrupted him yet again, and continued repeating their arguments, I jotted in my notes that he ‘sighed and looked frustrated’. Younger than the women, outnumbered in terms of gender, unable to claim a competent bilingual identity (Torras 2005), Eladio was ‘positioned in powerful ways which (he was) unable to resist’ (Blackledge and Pavlenko 2001: 250). In positioning Eladio as incompetent, the women claimed competent bilingual identities (Torras 2005), reflexively positioning themselves and each other as comparatively knowledgeable about both work responsibilities and English vocabulary. Given the emphasis that the employment unit had placed on housekeeping skills, these women could be seen as embracing the teacher’s gendered positioning (Davies 2001) in order to enhance their own status as good students skilled in the areas the teacher had been emphasizing, both linguistic and vocational. On the other hand, their joint argument that nothing could be more boring than housework indicated resistance to this positioning even as they embraced it (Kumaravadivelu 1999).

SOCIAL POSITIONING, LANGUAGE LEARNING, AND L2 SOCIALIZATION

In a 1985 article, Auerbach and Burgess challenged the assumption inherent in adult ESL materials that immigrants belonged in entry-level jobs. More recent ethnographic studies have chronicled the tendency on the part of ESL programs to likewise plan curricula based on unverified ideas about immigrants’ needs and goals (e.g. Goldstein 1997; Skilton-Sylvester 2002). ESL curricula and activities continue to position adult immigrants as aspirants to low-skill employment, and as illustrated above, this process of positioning can be highly gendered. Even beyond ESL, research on Latina immigrant workers confirms that they disproportionately end up in low-end service occupations (Menjivar 2003; American Sociological Association 2005). Although vocational ESL instructors may see themselves as ‘empowering’ students to enter the workforce, their classroom materials and activities often tend ironically to reproduce these (disempowering) societal tendencies (but see Auerbach and Wallerstein 2004).
In the classroom activities described above, the teacher and students drew from common discourses about work and gender (Davies and Harré 1990; Fairclough 1992; Kumaravadivelu 1999), discourses that defined people in socially recognizable categories (Wortham 2004), such as homemaker. Some of Kerrie’s assumptions about her students’ aspirations may have been drawn from her own experiences with societal discourses that shape opportunities for women. And yet, as recent literature on immigrant women and language learning would predict (e.g. Norton 2000), learners exercised considerable agency in this classroom. Attempting, and to some extent succeeding, to negotiate their way out of the discourses imposed on them, these women participated in typical discursive practices of vocational ESL without necessarily letting go of their ‘pre-existing idea(s) of themselves’ (Davies and Harré 1990: 56). Fabiana claimed a skill that had not been discussed in class but was key to her pre-immigration identity as a businesswoman, while Camila and her partners drew on their background knowledge about particular occupations to construct emphatic answers to the trickiest question on the handout. Moreover, Camila, Tomasa, and Grethel’s forceful arguments about the repetitiveness of housework index both their awareness of how they are positioned in the current labor market—and also their critique of this positioning. They discursively construct employment as an intensification of domestic drudgery, rather than as an escape from it.

In her presentation of a language socialization paradigm for L2 acquisition, Watson-Gegeo (2004) emphasizes that linguistic structures are encountered in sociopolitical contexts that drive home their significance. Thus, in language learning, ‘grammatically obligatory structures’ are no longer ‘irrelevant to a study of social power’ (van Dijk 2001). Fabiana’s interaction with the teacher above was a learning event that was simultaneously an event of positioning. In this event, Fabiana learned both that can is followed by the base form of the verb, and that her newly acquired cooking skills were more relevant to her employment future than her fourteen years in business. Several weeks later, Camila learned that distinguishing make from do could be crucial in assuring that her perspectives on common occupations would override those of her classmates. Through classroom discursive practices that ‘create expectations, meanings, and judgments about learners’ (Watson-Gegeo 2004: 340), both of these women were being interactively positioned and thus socialized into their teacher’s (and society’s) notions of realistic career goals for Latina immigrants in the current sociopolitical climate (Menjívar 2003; American Sociological Association 2005). Their L2 development was necessarily tied to that socialization.

A socialization paradigm calls attention to the ways that learners are constrained by powerful discourses, which construct identities, relationships, and knowledge (Fairclough 1992). At the same time, however, it points to the ways that learners are active agents in appropriating linguistic and cultural practices in new cultural settings. Indeed, the interactional
activities analyzed in this paper invited as well as limited learner agency (Watson-Gegeo 2004): the teacher had left blanks in the skills handout for students to write in abilities not listed, and she valued the built-in ambiguity involved in matching comments to occupations. Camila, in particular, was able to draw on these (minimal) agentive possibilities to position herself as linguistically and vocationally knowledgeable, constructing strong arguments for an answer that the teacher would not have chosen. In so doing, she was successfully (re)constructing a voice in her L2 (Ehrlich 1997; Vitanova 2005).

Nevertheless, Camila’s power to position herself seemed to be due to her already fluent English and the fact that she was prototypically a homemaker in a class geared to homemakers. As Duff writes, ‘Variable levels of participation and mastery of local conventions (can) accentuate differences among students and perhaps variable outcomes of language socialization’ (2002: 291). The teacher’s assumption (perhaps based on her own history) that the students in her class were prototypically homemakers may have supported Camila’s development of an L2 voice—but tended to limit the voices of less typical students such as Fabiana and Eladio. Thus, the interactive positioning observed in this classroom tended to reinforce the competence of students who met the teacher’s discursive expectations.

This paper contends that educators can best facilitate learners’ constructions of L2 identities and voices when they listen for and support their diverse reflexive positionings. Thus, one implication for teaching vocational ESL is that instructors need to adapt course materials to the backgrounds and aspirations of currently enrolled students, rather than falling back on old materials that worked in previous classes. This also implies a serious effort to determine and build upon students’ educational and employment histories, through questionnaires, discussions, writing activities, etc. At the same time, however, neither teachers nor students can afford to ignore the ways that the current US labor market is stratified by ethnicity, gender, and immigration status. ESL materials that discursively channel immigrant women into low-level service jobs (Auerbach and Burgess 1985) both mirror and reproduce (Fairclough 1992) the larger societal forces (Menjívar 2003; American Sociological Association 2005) which need to be addressed in vocational ESL. To this end, Auerbach advocates integrating language practice and social critique even at beginning levels (cf. Kumaravadivelu 1999). As an example, she quotes a brief composition that speaks to Fabiana’s dilemma: ‘My name is Batheemise My country is Haiti. Before I was Businesswoman. Now I am restaurant worker’ (Auerbach 1992: 76; cf. Auerbach and Wallerstein 2004). When teachers provide a space for critical reflection in ESL classrooms, they facilitate learners’ re-constructions of L2 voices (Ehrlich 1997; Vitanova 2005) strong enough to question the identities that society is assigning them.
TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

(.) Short pause
(1.0) Longer pause (in tenths of a second)
! Animated tone
*italics* Translation
*underlining* Syllable stress
↑ Markedly rising pitch
down Markedly falling pitch
→ Markedly level, ‘continuing’ pitch
: Syllable elongation
_underscore_ Lowered voice
[ ] Latching speech
() Overlapping speech
() Unclear or incomprehensible speech
((() Gestures, laughter, etc.

Final version received March 2007

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Vai Ramanathan for commenting on a draft of this paper; to Cecilia Gómez, Miriam Hernández, and Beatriz Willgoths for help with Spanish discourse analysis; and to three anonymous reviewers and editor Gabriele Kasper, whose comments shaped my revisions. An early version of this paper was presented at the 2004 TESOL convention in Long Beach, California.

NOTES

1 Names of people and places are pseudonyms.
2 The social positioning category ‘politics’ was chiefly relevant to life history interview data from Central American participants.
3 Note that in another context the same resources might have different functions (Couper-Kuhlen 2001).
4 Indeed, the career history of the instructor herself illustrates how white middle-class women are likewise positioned by gender: Kerrie got into ESL teaching as a part-time job that would not conflict with her responsibilities as a wife and mother.

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