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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to outline theory and methods associated with a research strategy for identifying elements of cultural congruence or incongruence in classroom speech events. The hypothesis of "sociolinguistic interference" proposed by D. Hymes is discussed and studies of language education of Hawaiians and other minorities are reviewed from this perspective. A strategy is proposed by which teacher behavior and classroom structure can be modified to affect cultural congruence in classroom speech events. At the same time, researchers and educators are encouraged to accept cultural diversity. (Author/APM)

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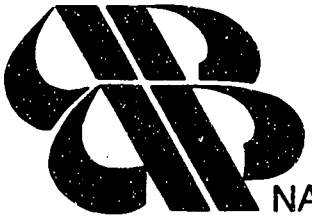

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR ASIAN AND PACIFIC AMERICAN EDUCATION

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THEORY AND METHOD IN ESTABLISHING THE CULTURAL CONGRUENCE OF CLASSROOM SPEECH EVENTS

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The purpose of this paper is to outline the theory and methods associated with a research strategy for identifying elements of cultural congruence or incongruence in classroom speech events. The theoretical cornerstone of this approach is the hypothesis of "sociolinguistic interference" proposed by Hymes (1971) and others. This hypothesis states that the academic problems experienced by many minority culture students result because of differences between the standards for speaking and face-to-face interaction in the home and school. Central to the hypothesis of sociolinguistic interference is the concept of the "speech economy"; each speech economy has its own ground rules for speaking performances consistent with its total pattern of culture (Bauman and Sherzer, 1974). In most circumstances, where participants are part of the same speech economy and a common understanding of interactional rules is held, there is no practical reason to study the nature of the rules. But when members of one culture encounter members of another, the lack of a shared set of rules may lead to serious misunderstandings (e.g., Hall, 1959); in these cases, analysis of the rules held by each side, and violated by the other, becomes important. As Gumperz (1977) points out, "co-occurrence expectations" and "contextualization expectations" are highly culture specific and can be upset by subtle variations in speech. Participants on both sides may feel uneasy, or even become extremely disturbed, without being able to pinpoint the source of the problem. It seemed to Hymes and others that these ideas were applicable to classrooms with minority culture students, where the teacher's behaviors reflect the values and norms of the mainstream culture, while the students' do not.

The classroom observations of Philips (1972) of Warm Springs Indians, Dumont (1972) of Sioux and Cherokee, and Boggs (1972) of Hawaiians indicated that the hypothesis of sociolinguistic interference was a plausible one. The operation of the "invisible culture" (Philips, 1974), or the unspoken rules governing interaction, could be seen in the behavior of both the teachers and the students, each apparently acting according to a set of standards unfamiliar to, or uncomfortable for, the other. The children in the classrooms studied appeared to behave in a contrary manner. Sometimes they were unresponsive, acting as if they were unwilling or unable to answer the teacher's questions. Then too, in the Hawaiian classrooms observed by Boggs, the children shouted out answers at times when it seemed they should have remained silent. Given the circumstances described by these ethnographers, the efficiency and effectiveness of teaching must have been drastically reduced, and it would not be surprising to find a record of poor academic learning. In the case of Hawaiian children, in particular, this record is only too well documented. Examining standardized achievement test results for all public elementary schools in the state of Hawaii, Klein (personal communication) found that schools with high proportions of Hawaiian students had lower scores than those with smaller proportions. We take this finding to be a reflection, not of the abilities of Hawaiian children, but of the degree of mismatch between the culture of the school and that of the children.

It would be inconsistent with the terms of the hypothesis of sociolinguistic interference to assign blame to either teacher or students for the unfortunate circumstances found in these classrooms. The problem quite clearly is one which could result if each party simply acted in the way which seemed to him to be reasonable and correct, assuming that

interaction is culturally patterned at a level below conscious awareness or control.

Important steps have recently been taken to build upon the intellectual foundation laid by the hypothesis of sociolinguistic interference. If sociolinguistic interference, or the cultural incongruence of sociolinguistic elements, can be thought to hamper the school learning of minority children, it seems reasonable to assume that cultural congruence in classroom speech events might have a positive effect on their academic performance. Thus, what we will label the hypothesis of "sociolinguistic facilitation" seems a logical extension of the earlier formulation.

The work of Erickson and Mohatt with Odawa (1977; Mohatt and Erickson, 1980), Van Ness with Athabaskans (1980), Au and Jordan (1980a) with Hawaiians, and Cazden, Carrasco, Maldonado-Guzman, and Erickson (in press) with Chicanos may be seen in this light. These studies are attempts to explore the issues from a positive perspective, by looking at settings where solutions to the problem of sociolinguistic interference apparently have evolved. A precondition in each of these studies was that the researchers had some understanding of the norms governing interaction in the children's culture.

The results reported by Van Ness and Cazden et al. were based on the study of teachers who were of the same cultural background as their students and who were found to interact with them in culturally congruent ways. Erickson and Mohatt, in a slightly different approach, contrasted the culturally appropriate behavior of an Odawa teacher with that of a white teacher. We can infer that a teacher who is of the same ethnicity as her students is more likely to have a sense of how to create culturally appropriate classroom events. In our opinion, however, these findings

should not be taken as proof that minority students can only be taught by teachers of the same ethnicity. Rather, we will argue that it is the teacher's behavior, and not ethnicity alone, which is significant. For example, the white teacher observed by Erickson and Mohatt gradually adjusted his behavior over the course of the school year, so that his teaching methods came to resemble those of the Odawa teacher. In the case of our own work, we should mention that the talk story hypothesis was first developed on the basis of videotaped lessons taught by white and Asian-American teachers to Hawaiian children. Although it might not be easy for a teacher of another ethnicity to learn the appropriate behaviors, it is certainly possible. An important feature of this type of research, then, is that it focuses on the identification of specific behaviors shown by teachers who are acting in culturally congruent ways.

But isolated behaviors, considered apart form the flow of life in the school and community, tell us little of cultural congruence or incongruence in speech events. What is needed, then, is a means for locating behaviors in the contexts which give them meaning to members of a culture. The concept of the "participation structure" provides us with just such a framework for thinking about co-occurrence expectations within a certain culture (for an extensive discussion, see Shultz, Erickson, and Florio, in press). Participation structures are rule-defined environments for interaction which can change from moment to moment. Structures are characterized by sets of nonverbal, as well as verbal, behaviors and are distinguished by differences in the rules governing speaking, listening, and turntaking. They involve a common, although generally subconscious, understanding by those present of the manner in which interaction is to be patterned. The rules provide participants with certain communicational

rights but also impose constraints, in the form of mutual obligations observed by all participants (Shultz et al., in press). A classroom lesson may be comprised of only one kind of participation structure but more often will be made up of several. For example, Bremme (1976) showed that "first circle" in a kindergarten-first grade classroom involved two different participation structures, "teacher time," when the children were obliged to orient themselves verbally (in terms of the topic addressed) and nonverbally to the teacher, and "student time," when they could orient to the child speaker, who addressed a topic of his own choosing.

Systematic methods of analyzing interactional patterns captured on videotape have evolved, growing from the concept of the participation structure. These methods are described in Erickson and Shultz (1977). Videotaped sequences are viewed repeatedly, until it is possible to hypothesize the categories of participation structures in the event. An effort is made to assign each portion of the event to one or another of the categories. Then the exemplars of each category are viewed in succession, and, as necessary, refinements are made in the definitions of existing categories, new categories are composed, and sections of the event are re-categorized. This process is repeated until all parts of the event can be classified.

The procedure advocated here for assessing the cultural congruence or incongruence of a classroom speech event involves first establishing points of convergence and divergence between participation structures in commonly occurring classroom speech events and speech events which are part of the minority child's own culture. But the task involves more than finding that some rules in the two settings are quite similar, or that some are vastly different. The second step is to discover whether

the similarity or difference in rules seems related to changes in the children's behavior. Features of the rules would be thought significant, and the basis for judging a classroom event to be culturally congruent or incongruent, only if they seemed meaningful in some way to the children, i.e., could be interpreted and assigned meaning in terms of cultural norms or had "message value."

An extensive analogy can be drawn to linguistic methodology (see the distinctive features analysis of participation structures in Shultz et al., in press), but perhaps the key point is that our concern be for emic as well as etic dimensions. It should be possible, in years to come, to draw up a hypothetical classification system for participation structures, or a taxonomy of linguistic, paralinguistic, and kinesic dimensions defining and distinguishing the structures. However, this information in itself would not reveal the meaning of a certain participation structure in a given speech event to members of any one culture.

To illustrate some of these points, we will use a piece of our own work as a case example. This study is in the "microethnographic" vein discussed above. The classroom speech event analyzed was a small group reading lesson, and the non-classroom setting was talk story, a common speech event in Hawaiian culture. The lesson was given by a Hawaiian teacher to a group of four disadvantaged Hawaiian second graders. This teacher's lessons were thought to exemplify the kind of direct instruction in comprehension advocated as part of the reading curriculum developed at the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP). This program has consistently been shown to be successful with this population of students (Tharp, 1980). The study was part of a line of research designed to explore the possibility that the success of the KEEP reading program might, in

part, be due to the presence of culturally congruent sociolinguistic features in the reading lessons.

In looking for similarities between the reading lesson and talk story, much reliance was placed on the previous research on talk story conducted by Boggs and Watson-Gegeo (Watson, 1975; Watson-Gegeo and Boggs, 1977). The information they provided was rich in detail and backed by an extensive base of ethnographic data (Gallimore and Howard, 1968; Gallimore, Boggs, and Jordan, 1974). Although Boggs and Watson-Gegeo do not use the term participation structure, they make it clear that talk story as a speech event is characterized by structures entailing a high proportion of joint speaking performance by the children. Specifically, there are structures for speaking in which children co-narrate stories, sharing in the retelling or formulating of events in well coordinated, rhythmic alternation. A child's competence in talk story is judged not on the basis of how well he can narrate a story on his own, but on the basis of how well he can cooperate with others in the group to produce a narrative. The specific purpose of our study, then, was to determine whether the reading lesson, like talk story, incorporated participation structures characterized by joint speaking performance.

Participation structures involving joint performance among students can be considered substantial departures from what appears to be the norm in many mainstream classrooms, i.e., participation structures based on the performance of an individual child. The common pattern involves a two or three part sequence. The teacher asks a question, a single student replies, and the teacher may then evaluate his response. This pattern apparently was prevalent in the lessons analyzed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) and Mehan (1979).

The lesson was about 22 minutes long (21 minutes, 52 seconds) and may be divided into three major parts: an introduction, in which personal experiences were shared and speculations made about the basal reader story to be read; a period of silent reading; and a follow-up discussion, in which details of the text were examined and then related to the children's experiences. About 4 minutes and 41 seconds were spent in silent reading and there was an 11 second interruption, leaving 17 minutes of lesson time for discussion. During discussion, there were 66 sequences or turns of speaking, and these fell into nine different categories of participation structure. The structures were differentiated on the basis of two factors, the number of child speakers (from one to all four) and their roles (whether sole speaker with the teacher, lead speaker, or commentator), as shown in Table 1. The nine structures were labelled 1) transition, 2) chorus, 3) single, 4) single/joint, 5) single/open, 6) joint, 7) joint/open, 8) open, and 9) "damaged" transition. The structures identified seemed to lie on a continuum (see Figure 1), the first three more closely resembling those of the conventional classroom recitation setting, and the others more closely resembling Hawaiian talk story, or its classroom approximation.

For the purposes of this discussion, the structures will not be described in detail (for a complete report, see Au, 1980), but will be treated in terms of the two sets implied in the continuum. In the first set, the conventional structures, the children are required either to remain silent, to interact with the teacher on a one-to-one basis, or to respond in a choral fashion, with one voice. In the second set, the talk story-like structures, the children are allowed to engage in joint performance; there are at least two child speakers, speaking in synchrony with one another and with the teacher.

Slightly more than half of the discussion part of the lesson was conducted in structures involving joint performance. Of the 66 sequences spent in discussion, 39, or 59% of them, were in talk story-like structures. These structures occupied 8 minutes and 47 seconds, or 52% of the time devoted to discussion. It is reasonable to conclude, then, that the reading lesson was like talk story in that it involved a high degree of joint performance.

At a more qualitative level, however, it was evident that joint performance in the reading lesson was not identical to joint performance in talk story. First, while Boggs and Watson-Gegeo had discovered co-narration, or the relating of story events by two speakers, to be central to joint performance in talk story, this was not the case in the reading lesson. Few instances of co-narration were found, but overlapping speech and comments on the statements of others did appear in the reading lesson with considerable frequency. Second, while in talk story there was always a lead speaker, some joint performance participation structures in the reading lesson did not require one, perhaps because some of the lead speaker's functions (as described by Watson, 1975) were assumed by the teacher. These differences serve to emphasize the complexity of the relationships between talk story and the reading lesson. While similarities were found, they did not take the form of identical events present in both.

These results strongly suggest that cultural congruence in school settings may exist in the absence of topical similarity to speech events in the children's culture. The reading lesson analyzed here had its focus for discussion a story from the children's basal reader. There is little likelihood in reading lessons that sex, the most popular talk

story topic identified by Watson-Gegeo and Boggs (1977), will ever be discussed. A basic point, then, is that cultural congruence in classroom lessons given to minority children may be achieved at the level of participation structure, and not only at the level of content, or subject matter. In other words, when working with minority students, it may be more important to adjust how we teach, rather than what we teach.

As Weisner (1978) and others have argued, the idea of cultural congruence should not be taken to mean that classroom settings should be replicas of those in the home; the appropriate relationship between the two is perhaps better conceptualized as one of isomorphism, rather than identity. Given this view, a culturally congruent classroom speech event is probably a hybrid, drawing features from conventional classroom speech events and from speech events in the children's culture, as well as having features unique to itself.

By attempting to identify elements of cultural congruence or incongruence at the level of participation structure, we may be able to avoid the tendency to view the operation of complex interactional processes in an overly simple way. The power of the concept of the participation structure, reflected in the findings described above, is that it allows us to compare and contrast classroom and non-classroom speech events, even when they lack surface or literal similarity. Shultz et. al. (in press) speak of "lurking impressions that something was wrong as we watched videotape in an initial attempt at comparisons of eating times and story times at home and at school" (ms. p. 16). Once able to overcome this literal view of the problem, they discovered "family resemblances" between math lessons and dinner times in the lives of young Italian-American children.

In concluding we wish to emphasize two important features of this research strategy for identifying elements of cultural congruence in classroom speech events. First, because it is based on what we have labelled the hypothesis of sociolinguistic facilitation, this strategy centers on the analysis of settings where things are going right. The close study of such settings may help make evident to researchers and educators the critical features of rightness in interactional rules for a particular group of minority children. The practical outcome of this research, then, may be the discovery of ways of changing school settings to accommodate minority children's interactional and learning styles. Teachers especially successful in helping minority children acquire academic skills will lead the way for the researcher. The researcher's task will be to try to understand why these teachers enjoy such success, to bring processes which normally operate at a subconscious level to a conscious one. Viewing and discussing videotaped lessons with teacher-collaborators will often provide the researcher with new insights, and these sessions are usually informative for the teacher, as well. Farther down the road, researchers and teacher-collaborators may work together to develop means of training other teachers to use the culturally appropriate behaviors identified.

Second, a major advantage of this research strategy is that it encourages us as researchers and educators to accept cultural diversity. By helping us to identify elements of cultural congruence in classroom speech events, it keeps us aware that there is no one correct way to teach and learn, that mainstream norms for classroom interaction are not necessarily or inherently superior to all others. This idea is all too often forgotten, as an example of our own shortsightedness illustrates. The results of our

research with Hawaiian children indicates that they seem to learn best when allowed to work cooperatively with one another, in reading lessons by producing answers in joint performance, and at learning centers when completing assignments independent of teacher supervision, by freely seeking help from, and offering help to, other children (Au and Jordan, 1980b). We were admonished once by an educator who had worked with students who were not Hawaiian for implying (unintentionally) that it was only Hawaiian children who would profit from opportunities to work cooperatively. He suggested on the basis of his own experience that most children would probably benefit if given these opportunities. Whether that would be the case or not, it is certainly possible that the search for elements of cultural congruence in classroom speech events will open our eyes to an ever wider range of pedagogical options.

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Table 1

Summary of the Key Features Distinguishing the Participation Structures

Type	Number of Child Speakers	Role of Child Speaker(s)
Transition	0	None - teacher only allowed to speak
Chorus	4	Respond in unison
Single	1	Sole speaker with teacher
Single/Joint	2	1 lead speaker, 1 commentator
Single/Open	3 - 4	1 lead speaker, 2 or 3 commentators
Joint	2	2 co-equal lead speakers
Joint/Open	3 - 4	2 co-equal lead speakers, 1 or 2 commentators
Open	4	4 co-equal speakers
Damaged Transition	1 - 4	Teacher serves as lead speaker, children as commentators only

Continuum of participation structures