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ABSTRACT

This report reviews findings from ethnographic and microethnographic research to further an understanding about how classroom interaction patterns can affect student achievement. The report discusses the concept of communicative competence in general and in the classroom setting in particular. Next, the report reviews findings from studies of home-school cultural discontinuities to illustrate the importance of understanding the different norms that may govern language interactions in the home, community, and classroom. Finally, the report discusses how an "emic" perspective (that is, the ability to empathize and understand other participants' perspectives and actions) can help teachers and clinicians bridge these differences between home and school. Thirty-six references are attached. (Author/SR)

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Abstract

Findings from ethnographic and microethnographic research are reviewed to further our understanding about how classroom interaction patterns can affect student achievement. The concept of communicative competence is discussed in general and in the classroom setting in particular. Next, findings from studies of home-school cultural discontinuities are reviewed to illustrate the importance of understanding the different norms that may govern language interactions in the home, community, and classroom. How an "emic" perspective (e.g., the ability to empathize and understand other participants' perspectives and actions) can help teachers and clinicians bridge these differences between home and school is the final topic discussed.

UNDERSTANDING CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION FROM AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

Have you ever hurt
about baskets?
I have, seeing my grandmother weaving
for a long time.
Have you ever hurt about work?
I have, because my father works too hard
and tells how he works.
Have you ever hurt about cattle?
I have, because my grandfather has been working
on the cattle for a long time.
Have you ever hurt about school?
I have, because I learned a lot of words
from my school,
And they are not my words.
(Anonymous, cited in Cazden & Dickinson, 1981, p. 458)

This poem, written by an Apache child in Arizona, captures the focus of this report. The focus is also illustrated in the comments of a kindergarten teacher in the Midwest who told me that she refers African-American children to the school's speech-language pathologist, not because she suspects that the children are language delayed, but because she cannot understand them. In this report, I review findings from ethnographic and microethnographic research to further our understanding about how classroom interaction patterns can affect student achievement. This line of research should be of particular interest to speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and other special educators, not just because many of their referrals come from the classroom teacher, but because they are increasingly being called upon to work within the classroom setting as part of the collaborative model of service delivery.

I draw on findings from two research groups: (a) sociolinguists and classroom ethnographers who focus on understanding the role of language in classroom instruction and (b) educational anthropologists who study the cultural role of language in home, community, and school settings. I begin by discussing the concept of communicative competence in general and in the classroom setting in particular. Next, I review findings from studies of home-school cultural discontinuities to illustrate the importance of understanding the different norms that may govern language interactions in the home, community, and classroom. I conclude by discussing how an "emic" perspective (e.g., the ability to empathize and understand other participants' perspectives and actions) can help teachers and clinicians bridge these differences between home and school.

Communicative Competence

Individuals are considered communicatively competent within a particular speech community when they know how to participate in socially appropriate ways (Florio-Ruane, 1987; Saville-Troike, 1989). Communicative competence is the knowledge that allows the individual to understand and act in concert with the expectations of the other participants. As young children, we learn how to communicate appropriately within the speech community in which we are raised. By the time we are five, most of us have acquired the linguistic and grammatical rudiments necessary to become competent speakers of the dialect and/or language we have heard around us (Lindfors, 1987). In addition to acquiring linguistic and grammatical rules, we become sensitive to the context, function, and meaning of interaction patterns. Depending on our speech community and our role within that community, we learn different ways to interact and talk with our parents, siblings, grandparents, other adults, and/or peers (Saville-Troike, 1989).

Because communicative competence reflects what is appropriate in one speech community, there will be some variation in what is appropriate in a different speech community, even within the same country. These variations in communicative competence are called sociolinguistic styles. García, Pearson, and Jiménez (1990) point out that the "persistence of different sociolinguistic styles, even when children are exposed to the mass media and to universal schooling, suggests that these styles are acquired at an early age through socialization" (p. 54). It is likely that children's willingness to acquire new styles is affected not only by their motivation to participate in other speech communities but also by their motivation to participate in larger society (see Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986).

SLPs need to understand that children who speak a distinct dialect of standard English or who are learning English-as-a-second-language face problems that are different from those of a child who has not learned the appropriate sociolinguistic styles for their own speech community. In working with a dialect mismatch between the teacher and the child, the SLP needs to be sensitive to the fact that all English-speaking Americans speak a dialect of English, although some dialects are closer to standard English than others. SLPs and classroom teachers need to understand that dialects, especially African-American dialects, are not deviant forms of language (Labov, 1982). In fact, there is evidence that teachers' negative reactions to children's use of dialect is what appears to adversely affect their academic performance and not the children's use of dialect itself (García et al., 1990). Many children who speak a distinct dialect of English cease to participate when SLPs or teachers continually interrupt their speech to correct a dialect feature or insist that they only use standard English (García et al., 1990; Smitherman, 1986). Acquiring the type of standard English characteristic of written text is a relatively new task for all children. However, the task is eased when the teacher shares the same dialect as the child or when the teacher is bidialectal and can help the child acquire two dialects (Delpit, 1988; Smitherman, 1986).

Children acquiring English as a second language are knowledgeable about appropriate ways of communicating in their native language but may need help in understanding and acquiring pragmatic skills in English. As an example, 16-year-old María, a Spanish-English bilingual student enrolled in a General Equivalency Degree (GED) program, appeared to be extremely fluent in both languages. Yet, she startled her adult education teacher when she authoritatively commanded that a worker at MacDonald's "give her" the food that she desired. Although the worker understood what María had said, he was taken back by her tone of voice and the imperative nature of her command. María had not acquired the appropriate courtesy protocol for this particular American social setting. Here is a situation where the SLP and María's classroom teacher could work collaboratively to develop such activities as role playing or the use of videotapes to teach her the appropriate courtesy protocols in English.

Communicative competence encompasses knowledge about the linguistic features of language, the interaction patterns necessary to successfully participate in a variety of roles, and the cultural knowledge necessary to understand how communication (both verbal and nonverbal) is shaped and interpreted within a particular culture or speech community (Saville-Troike, 1989). Almost all of us acquire communicative competence as young children immersed in the language and culture that surround us. As we encounter new contexts of language use, we add to our communicative competence repertoire, increasing the sociolinguistic styles with which we are familiar.

Classroom Interaction

The role that sociolinguistic styles play in determining school success may depend on the extent to which learning in the classroom is a function of the ability of the teacher and child to sustain meaningful interaction in the classroom (see Gumperz, 1982; Leacock, 1972). A basic assumption underlying many of the current studies of classroom interaction is that teaching and learning are "interactive processes

that require the active participation of teachers and students to ensure that information is conveyed as a precondition for learning" (Gumperz, p. 57).

Successful participation in the classroom requires a different type of communicative competence than that most children bring to school (Cazden, 1988; Saville-Troike, 1989). The teacher's role and status differ from those of other adults with whom the child has interacted or continues to interact. For example, teachers tend to be more absolute in their authority, controlling not only how children verbally and nonverbally interact with them, but also controlling how they interact with other children. This is true in both traditional classrooms and in more open-ended whole-language classrooms. Saville-Troike (1982) points out that communication in the American classroom traditionally has been characterized by "rigid turn-taking, with a raised hand to request a turn"; a definite "spatial arrangement, with children seated in rows of desks or around tables; and peer interaction which is initiated and controlled by adults" (p. 240). Although whole language classrooms provide students with more freedom (Goodman, 1989), the teacher still is the primary authority figure in the classroom. Children have to learn how to get her attention, when it is appropriate to speak to her in private or in front of the group, how to respond appropriately, with whom they can interact and when, and what the different spacial arrangements are for the different activities.

Classroom discourse in traditional and whole language classrooms is characterized by identifiable patterns that students must learn if they are to acquire classroom communicative competence. For example, one of the most common patterns of classroom interaction in the United States occurs when the teacher initiates an interaction, the student responds, and the teacher evaluates the student's response (Cazden, 1988; Mehan, 1979). This pattern of interaction may occur in whole-class settings, in small-group settings, or in teacher-student conferences. Teachers may use it to request an answer:

Teacher: John, what is the answer to #4?

John: Six.

Teacher: Good.

Other times, they may use it for clarification or to request unknown information:

Teacher: Diane, were you absent yesterday?

Diane: Uh-huh.

Teacher: Okay.

To avoid answering the question would be a breach of communicative conduct on the student's part. This pattern of interaction tends to characterize most teacher-led lessons, whether the lesson is reading, arithmetic, or social studies (Cazden, 1988). Teachers tend to use questions and answers within this pattern of interaction to elicit known information from children in order to monitor their comprehension of material and to evaluate their performance (Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1982).

Throughout their interactions with children, teachers also use certain types of speech acts to control behavior and solicit cooperation. Because the functions of these acts may vary from one context to the other, children have to learn how to interpret their teacher's use of these acts (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). For example, it is not unusual for middle-class Anglo teachers (especially female teachers) to pose a command as a question (e.g., "John will you please close the window?") (Delpit, 1988; Heath, 1982). Delpit points out that not all children are socialized in their speech communities to respond to this type of command. She contends that some African-American children get into trouble in school because they respond to it literally, interpreting it as a request that can be denied and not a command.

Classroom activity also is characterized by routinized speech events, such as show and tell, taking roll, storybook time, round robin reading, independent silent reading (Cazden, 1988; Saville-Troike, 1982). Children learn to recognize these speech events by paying attention to the contextualization cues--verbal, paralinguistic, and kinesic behavior--that teachers routinely use to introduce them (Cazden, 1988; Gumperz, 1982). When children recognize the cues and are aware of the shifting activities or emphases that the cues represent, they are then free to focus on the content of the lesson (Cazden, 1988; Harker & Green, 1985).

Because many whole language teachers eschew telling students what to do, students in this type of classroom setting may need to rely more on their implicit understanding of classroom communicative competence and contextualization cues to understand the type of communicative behavior that is appropriate. For example, these students will need to know when the classroom activity has shifted and when it is appropriate to discuss information with a peer, call out information, wait for a turn, whisper, or be silent.

Children's entry into the classroom speech community is eased when children and their teachers participate in the same speech community out of school (see Byers & Byers, 1972; Delpit, 1988; Heath, 1982; Michaels, 1981). In this situation, the teachers are familiar with the communicative competence that these children bring to school. As a result, they are able to shape these children's interactions so that they become socialized into the school environment. When teachers are unfamiliar with the sociolinguistic styles of children, then there are numerous opportunities for miscommunication and misassessment (Delpit, 1988; García, 1991; García et al., 1990; García & Pearson, 1991).

Classroom communicative competence involves knowing and understanding the classroom rules that govern classroom interaction. Sometimes the rules are explicitly stated (e.g., "Raise your hand and wait to be called on before you talk"). Other times, they are implicit, and children must learn them through observation and trial and error, just as they acquire communicative competence in their speech community. SLPs who collaborate with classroom teachers and work with children who are having difficulty interacting in the classroom need to understand the type of classroom communicative competence that the teacher expects. It also helps if the SLP is familiar with the type of communicative competence that the children are likely to bring with them to school. In this way, the SLP can help the teacher understand potential areas of miscommunication as well as help the child acquire the type of classroom communicative competence necessary to successfully participate in the classroom activities that the teacher deems necessary for instruction and evaluation.

Home-School Discontinuities

Differences in sociolinguistic styles in the American classroom have been noted in terms of participant structures (verbal and nonverbal patterns of interaction), discourse organizational patterns, and contextualization cues. Florio-Ruane (1987) points out that ethnographers who have contributed to this knowledge typically have studied home, school, and community settings through extensive participant observations and detailed analysis of recorded speech events. Their conclusions are the result of data triangulation (the comparison and integration of data from a variety of sources) across home, community, and school settings.

Participant Structures

Differences in the social conventions of verbal and nonverbal interaction can affect classroom teaching and learning. Who gets to speak when, how an individual holds the floor, and the way in which

questions and answers are formulated and sequenced are aspects of communicative competence. As Hymes (1972) explains,

> It is not that a child cannot answer questions but that questions and answers are defined in terms of one set of community norms rather than another, as to what counts as questions and answers, and as to what it means to be asked or to answer. (p. xxxi)

Findings from a variety of ethnographic studies suggest that some children hold different expectations for their participation, which, if not accommodated by the teacher, may adversely affect their involvement in speech events that are an integral part of classroom instruction. For example, Philips (1972, 1983) found that Native American students from the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in Oregon did not willingly respond when the teachers solicited individual volunteers or when they called on students to respond as a group or individually in front of the group. However, students' participation levels increased when they interacted on a one-to-one basis with the teacher or when they participated in small groups directed by themselves. Interestingly, the latter participant structure paralleled the type of interaction that was most common for the students on the reservation.

Similar types of home-school discontinuities were reported by Boggs (1972, 1978) for Hawaiian dialect-speaking children, by Heath (1982) for African-American children, and by Delgado-Gaitan (1987) for Mexican immigrant children. Boggs noted that the Hawaiian children in his study tended to respond as little as possible when a question was directed to them, but would not hesitate to blurt out the answer when the question was directed to another student or when the teacher directed the question to a group of students. This type of participant structure was similar to a discourse pattern, termed talk story, that was common in the children's speech community.

Heath (1982) found that working-class African-American students in the Carolina Piedmonts were not supposed to interact with their parents as conversational partners until they were considered "competent speakers." As a result, the children listened to adult conversation but did not actually participate in it. If an adult asked a child a question, it was one that required a "real" answer. Children learned to gain and hold the floor in their interactions with each other by using a story starter style and by utilizing analogies. Questions were not used to elicit known information for display purposes, the very type of question that most teachers use in the classroom to monitor and evaluate classroom learning.

Delgado-Gaitan (1987) discovered that Mexican immigrant children were more accustomed to a cooperative working environment than a competitive environment. It was also found that at home the children were allowed to negotiate how they would complete assigned tasks; whereas, at school, they were not. When the children tried to work cooperatively at school, the teacher misinterpreted their actions, viewing their efforts as cheating or disruptive.

Because classroom communication involves "the language of curriculum, the language of control, and the language of personal identity" (Cazden, 1988, p. 3), cultural discontinuities between home and school can result in lost teaching and learning opportunities, as well as incorrect assessment of children's capabilities (see García & Pearson, 1991). SLPs, psychologists special educators, and classroom teachers need to be aware of the social context of the "testing" situation, regardless of whether it is a formal or informal setting (Labov, 1982). Leap (1982), for example, found that a Native American student hardly responded when she was asked to retell a story read in class. However, she produced an extensive narrative when she was asked to make up a story about a classmate's picture. Edwards and García (1989) also discovered that an African-American child who was labeled language delayed by the classroom teacher, was very verbal but reticent to participate in adult-child storybook interactions because these interactions did not characterize her home life.

Discourse Organization Patterns

Cultural differences in how students structure their speech and writing also have been documented. Several studies suggest that teachers do not always understand why some groups of students may structure their oral speech in ways that vary from the classroom norm (Cooley & Lujan, 1982; Michaels, 1981). For example, Cooley and Lujan explored why college instructors said that their Native American students, who also happened to be monolingual English speakers, tended to ramble when they gave formal presentations in class. Through a comparative analysis, these researchers found that the structure and content of the Native American students' oral speeches tended to parallel those of their tribal elders. Both groups structured their speeches so that several topics were introduced in sequence without much transition, although co-referencing helped to provide cohesion within the topics. The students also tended to emphasize their sources of information more than the information itself; a characteristic of Native American culture.

Michaels (1981) found differences in discourse patterns among Anglo and African-American first graders during sharing time. The Anglo children tended to use a topic centered style, while the African-American children used a topic associating style that consisted of a series of "implicitly associated personal anecdotes" (p. 429). There were no explicit statements of overall themes or points but the anecdotes all related to a particular topic or theme that had to be inferred. Topic shifts were signaled prosodically and appeared to be difficult for the teacher to follow. The end result was that the Anglo teacher was able to use questions to shape the Anglo children's narratives, helping them to approximate the type of decontextualized, orderly sequenced prose that she thought they would later encounter in their reading. The teacher's attempts to help the African-American children, however, were mistimed and inappropriate. She eventually stopped calling on these children because she could not understand the focus of their presentations.

Contextualization Cues

The importance of contextualization cues in forming the content and surface style of interaction in the classroom should not be overlooked. Contextualization cues can include formulaic expressions; code, dialect, and style switching; prosodic signs, such as gaze direction, proxemic distance, kinesic rhythm or timing; choices among lexical and syntactic options; phonetic and rhythmic signs; and conversational openings, closings, and sequencings (Erickson & Shultz, 1977; Gumperz, 1982). As Gumperz explains, these cues allow the activity to be interpreted, "the semantic content to be understood," and the relationship of each sentence to the next to be foreseen (p. 31). When a listener does not perceive a cue or does not know its function, misunderstandings and different interpretations may occur. In the classroom this may result in misinterpretation of behavior and in loss of feedback.

Gumperz (1982) suggests that misinterpretation of contexualization cues in the classroom especially may occur because children use stress, rhythm, and intonation to communicate what adults customarily might put into words. For example, African-American children he studied in Berkeley tended to respond to the teachers' requests for action or information by saying, "I don't know." "I can't read." "I don't want to do this." "I can't do this." The teachers' usual response was to ignore the children or to halt any further interaction. However, an analysis of the contextualized cues used by the students revealed "similar intonational structures, characterized by a high pitch register, sustained tone, and vowel elongation on the last syllable" (p. 19). When a panel of African-American adults reviewed the speech samples, they said that the students actually were saying that they didn't like to work alone and needed help.

Differences in the timing of nonverbal gestures also have been noted. For example, Byers and Byers (1972) discovered that an Anglo teacher did not maintain the same type of eye contact with her Anglo children as she did with her African-American children. Although the African-American children and

Anglo teacher actually gazed at each other more often than did the teacher and Anglo children, their pauses were mistimed, and, as a result, less eye contact was realized. Byers and Byers suggest that differences in contextualization cues may mean that students will miss "subtle interconnections" in the presentation of information. As a result, students will not feel secure "in what [they have] learned and in what the significance of learning is" (p.27).

There are a variety of reasons why children and teachers from different speech communities may miscommunicate. Home-school discontinuities may be reflected in different participant structures, discourse organizational patterns, and contextualization cues. Clinicians need to be aware of these differences and take the time to find out if a child's communication problem represents such a discontinuity. To do this, they will need to observe both the teacher and the child in the classroom, documenting the points of miscommunication and the type of classroom communicative competence that the teacher expects. In addition, they will have to find out more about the child's background and the type of communicative competence that prevails in the child's speech community. They especially need to be open to input from the child's parents and other members of the community. Heath (1982) began her longitudinal study of literacy and communicative behavior in the Carolina Piedmonts when the African-American children's parents told her that they didn't understand why the teachers said that their children couldn't answer questions. Juxtaposing conflicting points of information is one way to discover home-school discontinuities that have the potential for successful resolutions.

Bridging Differences

A variety of researchers and educators have suggested that school professionals (classroom teachers, speech language pathologists, special educators, administrators, and psychologists) need to be aware of the emic perspective. That is, we need to understand the importance of viewing school events from the cultural perspectives of the participants. If we are to do this, we not only have to be open to understanding how communicative events are interpreted by others, but also have to acknowledge that our own patterns of interaction are influenced by our own socialization. A key component of the emic perspective is the ability to observe others from their perspective and to understand how we are conditioned by our own perspective.

Educators who have been willing to bridge differences in communicative competence have met with some success. For example, the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) in Hawaii (Au, 1980) has had considerable success in increasing Hawaiian children's reading comprehension by allowing the students to engage in the type of talk story that Boggs (1972, 1978) described. Although teachers in the KEEP program generally initiate reading comprehension questions, the students respond by calling out their answers and building on each other's responses until the group as a whole has reacted to the teachers' questions. The interaction pattern that dominates during this part of the instruction is quite different from the teacher initiates/student responds/teacher evaluates type of pattern that generally characterizes most reading group instruction.

Two other examples are provided by Heath (1982) and Erickson and Mohatt (1982). In Heath's study, the teachers were able to bridge differences in interaction patterns by incorporating more of the African-American students' questioning patterns in their own classroom instruction and by attempting to introduce the African-American students, in a risk-free manner, to the types of questions that they preferred. Erickson and Mohatt found that an Anglo teacher was able to interact successfully with his Native American students when he accommodated cultural differences in sociolinguistic styles throughout the year by increasing his one-on-one interactions with the students and by reducing the "spotlighting" of student interactions in front of an audience.

Many times observant teachers will naturally adjust to what they perceive to be a lack of communication. Other times, they will need to rely on outside help to explain a classroom occurrence they do not

understand. Carrasco (1981) found that even a well-intentioned bilingual teacher misread the potential capability of one of her bilingual students. In response to a bilingual aide's comment that the Hispanic children talked more often in groups, Carrasco began to videotape one of the bilingual children the teacher was considering retaining. He found that this girl was the one who was helping the other students complete work that the teacher did not think she could do on her own.

Genishi (1985) points out that teachers frequently may not be able to do systematic observations due to the nature of their jobs. Here is an area where clinicians should be able to help teachers. By observing and/or videotaping the classroom, interviewing the teacher, student, and the student's parents, and visiting the student's home and community, the clinician may be able to discover why communication has gone awry. The clinician can share this information with the classroom teacher and use what she or he knows about language acquisition, classroom communicative competence, and potential home-school discontinuities (see Harker & Green, 1985) to help the teacher develop a plan to bridge communication differences.

Sometimes, bridging communication differences may involve a radical change in how the teacher presents material or facilitates interaction, such as found in the KEEP program (Au, 1980). Other times, it may involve a simple change, such as not interrupting the oral reading of a dialect-speaking student when the student uses a dialect feature that preserves meaning, or becoming aware of how students from a particular speech community use language, as described in Gumperz (1982). Still other times, it may involve an instructional modification, where the teacher modifies the ways in which she or he elicits students' active participation in a communicative event deemed necessary for learning and instruction, at the same time that she or he makes explicit or introduces students to those aspects of classroom communicative competence that tend to prevail in the American classroom, as shown in Heath (1982).

Summary

If school professionals are to take an emic perspective, where the focus is on understanding the situation from the different cultural perspectives of the participants, then they need to step out of their roles as participants in the school's speech community. They need to recognize that there are other patterns of communication that are just as viable as those they are accustomed to in school. School professionals also have to be willing to search for alternative explanations when students are not performing well in school. They have to be willing to accept the interpretations and observations of not just the teacher, but also of the student, the student's parents, and members of the community.

The clinician can help in this effort. By using ethnographic techniques, such as home-school observation, interviews, and data triangulation, the clinician can determine if a communication problem is due to a mismatch between the student's communicative competence and the communicative competence expected at school. An ethnographic approach not only can help clinicians understand the source of communication problems, but also can help them work with the classroom teacher, the student, and the student's parents to design a plan so that differences in communicative competence can be bridged.

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