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ABSTRACT

An ongoing four-year ethnographic study of two cohorts of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learners enrolled in mainstream Canadian primary school classrooms is described. The two cohorts are: (1) a group of six children observed from the beginning of kindergarten through the end of grade 2, and (2) five children observed from early kindergarten through grade 1. The language backgrounds of the children include Chinese, Polish, and Punjabi. Classroom observation of the children focused on classroom practices that appear to facilitate or inhibit learners' acquisition of the language used within this community. Practices facilitating access were found to include daily use of choral speech (poems, chants, series of items), songs, and rhymes. Practices blocking access included teacher-led "discussion" using the inquiry-response-evaluation method and small-group discussions in which classroom hierarchy and talk conventions are strictly enforced and which appear to inhibit interaction. Excerpts of classroom conversation are offered as illustration. (MSE)

Communities of participation in learning ESL

Presentation to TESOL Conference March 1998

Seattle, Washington

by

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This presentation is based on an ongoing four-year ethnographic study of two cohorts of ESL learners enrolled in mainstream Canadian primary classrooms (K-2). The setting for the study is a school in a suburban Canadian working class neighbourhood. About 50% of the children at the school come from a wide variety of minority language backgrounds, including Punjabi, Polish, Cantonese, Thai, French, Spanish and so on.

The study involves two cohorts of children: the first cohort of 6 children was observed from the beginning of kindergarten to the end of grade two. The second cohort of 5 children have been observed since they entered kindergarten in 1996 and onto the present in grade 1. The language backgrounds of the children in the two cohorts are Chinese, Polish and Punjabi.

We have conducted half day observations in the children's classrooms once a week over the school years, during which time we take field notes and audiotape children as they go about their activities. In addition, an experienced video technician from the university videotapes the children for a half day once a month. Samples of audiotapes for the various years are transcribed, and video recordings are transcribed in part,

and are being used as triangulation devices throughout the writeup of the study.

The theoretical orientation of our research is generally termed "socio-cultural" or "socio-historical", based on the work of the Russian Marxist scholars, Vygotsky and Bakhtin, and formulated in North America by researchers interested in the social and cultural aspects of development and learning. According to Vygotsky, learning is a "profoundly social phenomenon" (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 12) and mental processes are constructed through relationships with others. For him, one understands development by examining individuals over time in their social contexts and by examining the tools they use in these contexts.

The literary scholar, Bakhtin, as well, stressed the social, cultural and historical situatedness of individuals and their actions. His developmental notion of how it is that speakers come to use the tool of language is stated:

> Words are, initially the other's words, and at foremost, the mother's words. Gradually, these 'alien words' change, dialogically, to become 'one's own alien words' until they are transformed into 'one's own words'. (Bakhtin, 1984)

and

> We come to know our native language--its lexical composition and grammatical structure--not from dictionaries and grammars but from concrete utterances which we hear and which we ourselves reproduce in live speech communication with people around us. We assimilate forms of language only in forms of utterances. (Bakhtin, 1986)

Bakhtin's argument for how persons appropriate language is foundational to the work we have undertaken and to the analysis of our data.

To date, much of the research on learning done from a sociocultural perspective has examined dyadic relationships between a learner and an adult (parent or instructor) or more skilled peer. In recent work, however, anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger have offered a way to think about larger social collectivities in theorizing learning as apprenticeship in communities of participation. They write:

> A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice.

Lave and Wenger focus on distinguishing persons on the basis of newcomer as opposed to oldtimer status and on describing what they call the "legitimate peripheral participation" of newcomers and oldtimers in community practices.

How might one conduct research in classrooms from this perspective? To do so, one might examine relationships between and among the teacher and the children, the activities in which they engage and the material, linguistic and other intellectual resources with which they mediate their activities. Recognizing the dynamic interdependence between persons, practices and resources makes such analysis extraordinarily complex. And it is also necessary to recognize the "tangential and overlapping" circles of context in which teachers, children, classroom practices and classroom resources are embedded. (classroom in a school in a residential community in a city and so on)

How does one view second language learning and how might one investigate it from such a perspective? While SLA research has traditionally seen second language learning as an individual cognitive phenomenon of internalization of L2 knowledge, this socio-cultural perspective encourages us

to see learning a second language as changing participation in a community which uses this particular linguistic means to mediate community activities. Recognizing the relationship between persons, practices and resources, Hall (1995) writes:

> 'Acquiring a language' or 'becoming competent' is not a matter of learning to speak. It is, instead, a matter of developing a range of voices, of learning to ventriloquate i.e. to (re)construct utterances for our own purposes from the resources available to us (Bakhtin 1986: 6), within and through our social identities in the many and varied interactive practices through which we live our lives (Hall, 1995: 218).

For Hall, one's identities, that is, who one can be and who one is seen as, are clearly important in how one can appropriate the "alien words" referred to by Bakhtin. Hall's analysis of identity focuses most closely on aspects of group identity such as gender, age, or class, for example. In our research, we examine how identity is also locally defined and how aspects of identity constructed locally constrain access to the words of others.

In this talk today, we examine practices which appear to offer our subjects relatively unproblematic access to the linguistic resources of their community; and we examine as well situations in which our subjects appear to have relatively limited access to community resources. We do this not to recommend particular practices to teachers, because the practices are already well known to them. Rather, our interest is in analyzing how we might understand, from the theoretical standpoint we find so promising, what it might be about particular practices that seems to facilitate learners' possibilities for appropriating the words of their communities.

Practices which facilitate access to community resources

One of the practices we have examined appears strongly tied to the age of the children. In the kindergarten classroom, we observed frequent daily use of choral speech. From the beginning of the year on, we observed the teacher engaging the children in reciting poems, chants, series (days of the week, months of the year, for example). In addition, the explicit literacy-preparatory activity in which they engaged, reading the "morning message", was also accomplished initially chorally, with the teacher obviously providing a verbal model for the children for several repetitions of the event.

In these video excerpts, we see one of the children from the second cohort, a Punjabi language background child, participating quite minimally in the choral activities of the circle at the beginning of the year, and then participating enthusiastically in these choral activities at the end of the year. In the first excerpt, Baljit looks like she's participating, but our field notes record her lip movements as random and sporadic. In the second excerpt, taped in May, she really is participating. This pattern was common for many of the subjects we examined, and for many of the anglophone children as well. In addition, we often noticed children breaking into repetitions of the choral chants as they worked individually at their desks, and this choral chanting becoming part of the "soundscape" of the classroom.

From the theoretical perspective we are exploring, what seems important with choral work is that children are able to participate from the very beginning, albeit sometimes very minimally, in the accomplishment of a classroom practice, through the support offered by the community. In addition, the pleasure the children take in the rhythm of the choral work is

obvious and appears important in their choices to engage in it, even when the teacher is not leading. By having access to a practice, to seeing/hearing that practice accomplished by the community as a whole, and by minimal participation, the child is able, over time, to appropriate that practice. In Bakhtinian terms, she is able to ventriloquate the words of her community over time with no difficulty. Her individual initial minimal participation is not a matter of particular interest (or even notice) to the community; nor is her later fuller participation.

Similarly to the choral speech activities, the teacher introduced songs and rhymes to the children and repeated them over and over, with the children all gradually coming to participate more and more fully. In some cases, we think that in some sense the songs 'seduced' particular children into voice and gave them words to appropriate and a safe position from which to speak.

Songs and rhymes also appeared to give the children a site for play with words and thoughts. Consider this exchange recorded in the children's kindergarten year toward the end of one morning:

Transcript: 1/23/97
(00.1)
(1) Sally: ...have a big heart.
(2) Hari (LOUDER): Dicky dicky dinosaur eating the plant.
(3) Sally: Ha, ha, ha. Dicky dicky dinosaur eating some hearts.
(4) Hari: Dicky dicky dinosaur eating some plant, jump in the rock (?) swamp (?), and drink the water.
(5) Sally: Dicky dicky dinosaur comes to our lake.
(6) Hari and Sally together: Dicky dicky
(7) Sally: dinosaur eat some plant, dicky dicky
(8) (Hari on top of her): dicky, dicky dinosaur
(9) Hari (takes over): swimming on the water.

The song or rhyme in this excerpt is a variation the children have made up partly from the rhyming story 'dicky, dicky dinosaur' which the teacher had just (3 minutes before) read to them. It is interesting that Hari introduces a line about eating the plant, as the teacher had just explained the meaning of the word 'herbivore' to the children as she was reading the rhyming story.

An examination of the data reveals that all the elements in the children's rhyme (Example #1) were contained in the teacher's lessons about dinosaurs in the previous week and undoubtedly as was the case in this kindergarten over the year, continued and repeated through thematic activities throughout the week. Sally and Hari incorporate this learning into the contributions they make to this communal song.

Practices which block access to community resources

The first practice is the IRE sequence which is still, despite its battering from academics over the years, in common use in the classrooms in which we observed. This is teacher-led "discussion" with large groups of children in which the teacher asks a question, students respond individually and teachers provide evaluative comments to the student responders. The IRE sequence, according to Courtenay Cazden (1988), is the default pattern of teacher and student interaction and will be so until "deliberate action is taken to achieve an alternative" (p. 53). IRE sequences are similar across classes and grade levels. We want to show here a very short excerpt from a much longer IRE sequence in which the topic is "Canada's Food Guide" and "Food Groups". This excerpt involves one of our subjects in grade 2:

Teacher: No Surjeet, It's not on the ceiling dear/ it's right up here in front of you//

Tell me the name of <u>one</u> food group// One of the four food groups//

5 second pause.

Surjeet: *(quietly)* Apple?

Teacher: Surjeet/ I need the name of the <u>entire</u> food group// Apple is part of a particular food group//

The names are written right there dear//

They're printed right there//

All you need to do is read it dear//

11 second*pause*

What's the name of that food group/ that apple belongs to//

Surjeet: *(answers very quietly)*

Teacher: I can't hear you honey/a little louder//

Surjeet: Veg-e-tables/veg-e-tables/

Teacher: Pardon me? // *(leans forward, 6 secondpause)*

What is an apple, dear/

Surjeet: Fruit//

Teacher: An apple is a fruit so it belongs to the fruit and //

Surjeet: Vegetables/

Teacher: Thank you dear//The fruit and vegetable group//

In many ways, the IRE is a practice which seems almost opposite to choral speech or singing. Hierarchy is very clear in IRE and talk conventions are rigorously enforced in this classroom by the teacher. The teacher-enforced rule "one speaker at a time" is regulative; refusal to participate, flawed or minimal participation is salient, and teacher evaluation provides consequences for refusal, flawed or minimal participation. We have many

examples in our data of IRE sequences, and we notice that several of our subjects frequently declined bids to participate or provided very minimal responses in such settings. We noticed in the case of a few children in the first cohort decreasing participation in IRE sequences over the course of their school years. We also noticed that students who had appeared competent with regard to the intellectual demands of the teacher's questions in other settings, were much more tentative and less self confident in the teacher-led discussions.

Many critics of IRE practices in classrooms recommend small group work, citing its advantages in providing students with more turns at talk. Some advocates also hypothesize that horizontal status relations among the students will allow collaboration in accomplishing school tasks. It has become clear to us in the classrooms we have observed that some small group work does seem to facilitate students' access to the knowledge of peers and the community as a whole. But small group conversations do not always appear so facilitative of access to community knowledge resources. Consider the following which occured in the continuation of the Canada's Food Guide Lesson with Surjeet described earlier. In this part of the lesson, children were paired with other children and had to interview each other about their favourite food in each food group. The teacher had given general instructions on how to complete the sheet to the whole class, but Julie and Amy had just gone to the teacher for a repetition of the instructions. After the teacher explained again how they could interview one another:

Amy *(L1 Cantonese)*: Uh what's your favourite, um/

Julie *(L1 Polish)*: [vegetable or grain]

Amy: [vegetable or grain] products//

Julie: Ummmm//

Amy: Did you know how to write cereal//

Julie: I know it's up there/ but I can't look//

Amy: C-E/C-E makes S sound//

Julie: 'Kay/um/ waffles//

Amy: Waffles?// *(she tries to write this down. Julie leans closer.)*

Julie: /wwwwww-aeaeaeaeae/

Julie: Ok, now, Amy, what is your veg, favourite vegetable and fruit?//

Amy: Um, apple//

Julie: Apple is fruit/Do you like bananas?//

Amy: Well/ um/ sometimes/

Julie: They're good for you//

Amy: The yellow ones//

Julie: Ok/ I'll print banana, okay?//

Amy: OK//

Julie:/b-b-b-ae-ae-ae- n-n-n- ae-ae-ae--n-n-n-ae-ae-ae/ There's banana//

Amy: Those, those apples makes your teeth, when you teeth is wob, wobb, um, really like moving when you move it, push it. Like when you eat apple, it will fall in, into the apple and you will eat the tooth//

Julie: 'Kay/ now you ask me//

Amy: What's your favourite vegetable or fruit?/ Fruit?//

Julie: Mmmm. I like/ I like um apple.

In this conversation, there does not seem to be much space for attempts to "play" in the talk. The girls collaborate to some extent in helping one another spell the words, and in cueing one another about asking the questions; but one could not really say that this is a conversation which is playful or one which is unaffected by power relations. Although the teacher is not present, the speech acts the girls engage in have been mandated by the

teacher. The worksheet also mediates their activities. While the customary power relations between the girls are only subtly manifest here, it is evident that Julie rather easily persuades Amy that she should choose bananas as her favourite fruit and vegetable rather than apples, and that she ignores Amy's conversational gambit about how apples can make you swallow a loose tooth. Despite the children's apparent status equality, and the fact that "mistakes" could not be very consequential, the children do not stray very far from the task set for them by the teacher, and Amy's attempt to speculate beyond the sheet doesn't go anywhere.

On another occasion, the grade 2 teacher was reading the children the story "Ming Lo Moves the Mountain" and she stopped reading after every page or so and directed the children to speak to a partner and speculate about what might come next in the story. The children were permitted to choose their partners, but after every break for these mandated conversations, they were told to find a new partner, someone to whom they had not yet spoken. In the following excerpt, two partner groups are visible in the videotape. In the conversation between Amy and Mary, we see a lively and obviously pleasurable discussion. In the case of Julie and her partner, no such pleasure is evident, and the children in that pairing appear to say very little throughout the time:

Mary: With the um woods on your head and the mountain would move far far away and you could dig and build your house again//

Amy: _____

Mary: Yup//

Amy: Okay, so that wise man said that/

Mary: And that wise man was covered in smoke so they can't see him

//(Both girls giggle)

Amy: Yeah, the wise man sticks glue like this to your feet and put a log on your head and/

Mary: No/ like put the logs of your house on/ no on/

[over your head and hold them and close your eyes//

Amy: [over your head and hold them and close your eyes//

Mary: [And keep on doing this for many hours//

Amy: [And keep on doing this for many hours//

And the mountain will go away/far far away//

Mary: So they can build the house again/ *(starts to bounce)*

But -they -did -not- say -that- so -I -think- it- will- not- work//

Amy: I think it will work//

Mary: Well I think it will work too//Uh, I gotta get up//

Teacher: And stop/please//

As conversational analysts have pointed out for some time, conversations can be like dances, and this "dance" in which Amy and Mary engage looks pleasurable and harmonious. Both contribute to the conversations and despite Mary's longer experience with speaking English (she is an anglophone), Amy does not hestitate to disagree with her. This conversation is not long and its specific characteristics are not shared in all the groups. Julie's conversation with Donna in the foreground was so short in duration that it was finished before Mary and Amy began. Nevertheless, we think it points in promising directions.

Conclusion

We are just beginning our analysis of the material we have collected in these classrooms, and so the ideas we offer today should be understood to be

tentative and exploratory. We would like to make two major points about the material presented here.

First, it appears clear to us that building, maintaining and protecting one's identity in a setting interacts with how one participates in activity there. In the situation of the choral repetition of series, poems and songs which we have described, children have access to the expertise of their peers as well as the teacher in organizing their performances, and "errors" are regarded as fanciful and ludic, and are not obviously consequential. In situations in which the identity positions of the children are not in negotiation and their activities are "playful", community knowledge appears accessible to all, and the language of their community appears rich and open to appropriation. In such situations, the children's participation is transformed over the course of time from minimal to full. However, there are other situations in classrooms which do make differential performance obvious and consequential. In the case of the IRE sequences (and the partner conversations which seemingly get "re-keyed" as IREs), performances are public and consequential.

In the case of the subjects of our study, in several cases we have noted refusal to participate in such sequences or very minimal participation in such practices. It may be that these children assess the costs to their identities for error in such settings as being too high.

In small group work, when power relations the children have negotiated elsewhere are not so seemingly important, it is a bit surprising to see our subjects sometimes choosing to participate very minimally as well. We have been thinking about how another insight of Bakhtin's helps us understand this phenomenon. Bakhtin makes a distinction between authoritative and internally persuasive discourse. Authoritative discourse is

discourse in which someone assumes a position of autority over other speakers abd allows other speakers no opportunity to "play" in the text. In contrast to this kind of discourse, Bakhtin poses the possibility of "internally persuasive discourse", which is open to the "interanimation" of other voices:

> Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses of our words from within...The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is not finite, it is open; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever new ways to mean. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345-346)

We have been considering the possibility that the speech situations we see in classrooms which seem to ease the appropriation of "words" for the subjects in whom we are concerned, are situations in which there is play with the borders, and where children can find "ever new ways to mean". Such an hypothesis might be helpful in understanding why so many observe that children learn the words of the playground before the words of their teachers or textbooks. When children can find desirable identities in words, when they can play in words , when those words allow them to "answer back", and when the words of their community are open and accessible to them, then we see children transforming their participation, "developing a range of voices, of learning to ventriloquate..., within and through [their] social identities in the many and varied interactive practices through which [they live [their lives. "(Hall, 1995)

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