DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 453 513 CS 014 310

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TITLE Language Patterns That May Help or Hinder Learning: Taking an Inventory of Your Assumptions.
INSTITUTION Reading Recovery Council of North America, Columbus, OH.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 7p.
AVAILABLE FROM Reading Recovery Council of North America, Inc., Suite 100, 1929 Kenny Road, Suite 100, Columbus, OH 43210-1069. Tel: 614-292-7111; Web site: http://www.readingrecovery.org.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Journal Articles (080) -- Opinion Papers (120)
JOURNAL CIT Network News; p7-11 Spr 1999
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; *Language Arts; *Language Patterns; *Learning Processes; Primary Education; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Competencies; Conversation; *Reading Recovery Projects

ABSTRACT

Why is it important to take a closer look at the patterns of language, or discourse, in the conversations in Reading Recovery teachers' lessons? Conversations occur throughout the lesson as teachers communicate with children and are not limited to a procedural component of the lesson related to composing. Teachers' theories of the world, literacy learning, and children are manifested in the discourse patterns evident in their interactions with children. It is crucial that Reading Recovery teacher leaders inventory their assumptions about language. This article first addresses how children construct communicative competencies necessary for success in school. Then, the teacher/author uses examples in the article from her own lessons to examine discourse patterns that help or hinder language learning. The article closes with a call to teacher leaders and teachers to check on their assumptions through examining patterns of language interactions in lessons. (Contains 14 references.) (NKA)

Language Patterns that May Help or Hinder Learning: Taking an Inventory of Your Assumptions.

by Nancy Anderson

Language Patterns that May Help or Hinder Learning:

Taking an Inventory of Your Assumptions

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As we coach Reading Recovery teachers and teach children, our efforts to support children to compose meaningful text may result in frustration. Is this scene familiar?

"So what did you do after school yesterday?" Terry shrugged his shoulders and in a monotone voice responded, "I don't know." Okay, I thought, maybe if I share something he will get the idea. "Well, I read this really good book after school. What did you do that was fun?" Silence, blank stare, "I don't know." Okay, what do I do now? The example comes from one of my lessons and throughout the exchange, I thought if I asked the right question, or brought up the right topic, a conversation would follow.

Conversation similar to the preceding example and Dr. DeStephano's presentation at the 1998 Teacher Leader Institute prompted me to inventory my assumptions and actions related to language learning in Reading Recovery lessons. Why is it important to take a closer look at the patterns of language, or discourse, in the conversations in our lessons? Conversations occur throughout the lesson as we communicate with children and are not limited to a procedural component of the lesson related to composing. Our theories of the world, literacy learning, and children are manifested in the discourse patterns evident in our interactions with children (Gee, 1990). Essentially, laying our cards on the table, or talking about our theories, enables us to refine and reshape our assumptions (Costa, 1994) regarding children, language, and learning. Because there is a relationship between language, conversation, and thought (Bruner, 1983; Clay, 1998; Dewey, 1916; Diaz, Neal, & Amaya-Williams, 1990; Luria, 1981; Vygotsky, 1986), accelerated progress and the rate at which children move through their Reading Recovery program intertwines with the discourse patterns we use. These discourse patterns are evidence of our theories of literacy and children. It is critical that teacher leaders inventory their assumptions about language. They often have to problem solve with teachers who are working with children who may be reluctant to engage in conversations. Terry is an example of such a child.

How children construct communicative competencies (Hymes, 1994) necessary for success in school is addressed first. Then, I use examples from my own lessons to examine discourse patterns that help or hinder language learning. The article closes with a call to teacher leaders and teachers to check on their assumptions through examining patterns of language interactions in lessons.

Language Learning & Communicative Competence

The goal of Reading Recovery is to help the child construct a self-extending system, which fuels further learning in the classroom. How do we do this? I suggest it is through our purposeful conversations. Language learning opportunities allow the child to develop communicative competencies (Hymes, 1974) necessary for success in school.

Characteristics of Language Learning

- *Learning language*
- *Learning through language*
- *Learning about language*

Learning language is the process whereby children, interacting with others, construct a language system. Halliday (1982) asserted there are three interrelated characteristics of language learning that take place side by side, reinforcing each other, and are largely subconscious in the learner.

As children are constructing a language system, they are also learning through language to make sense of their world. They negotiate new learning as opportunities arise. Using both systems allows them to develop awareness of the nature of language and its forms and functions.

As children learn language, they are also learning the social and linguistic rules that enable us to speak and interact appropriately in different social situations (Hymes, 1974). Thus, when children learn language, learn about language, and learn through language, they are also learning how to understand and effectively engage in the cultural practices in which language is embedded (Gee, 1990).

Discourse in Reading Recovery Lessons

The teacher's theories of the world, literacy learning, and children are manifested in language patterns during lessons.

If we view language learning in our lessons as these three intertwined connected strands, I argue we would use discourse patterns that help children construct communicative competencies related to success in school. A first step is to examine our assumptions about language variation and acknowledge that children entering school are already communicatively competent at home, a rich strength we must tap.

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Language Patterns that May Help or Hinder Learning

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Children and Communicative Competence

Young children quickly develop communicative competencies as they relate to their family. Observing the interactions between children and caregivers, you can begin to understand how parents show their children what is acceptable and unacceptable in terms of behavior and communication in a variety of settings—on the children's playground, in a church service, or at a restaurant.

When children begin school, their competencies which served them well at home may not be congruent with schooling because they are different (not deficient!). For example, a child may not be required to wait his or her turn to speak at home, yet in many classroom settings, children must learn to take turns and raise their hand as an indicator they have something to say. Few dinner conversations include raising your hand to speak.

Communicative Competence:
The knowledge of the social and linguistic rules that enable us to speak and interact appropriately in different social situations.

All languages are rule-governed, patterned systems, which are generative in nature (De Stephano, 1978). Differences do not equal deficits; rather the deficits lie in our understandings of the learner and how they learn language. Children who are learning English as a second language use a generative system of syntax, based on their first language to provide the foundation of their acquisition of English. These children use a "structure" in their newly emerging understanding of the English language, and their home language is the foundation. Children learning English as a second language have "structure" to their language; it just may be different than the teachers. All children and especially ESL children must have a wealth of opportunities to experiment with meaningful language use while they are in the process of learning language.

If the ways in which children express meaning are not validated through interactions during the transition to school there is potential for frustration and withdrawal resulting in a passive learner. We must resist using the label of "low" language simply because the amount of talk is minimal or the language is **different** from ours. We may have unknowingly encouraged the passive response.

An example of language difference lies in one of the conversations Terry and I had as I picked him up for our lesson one day. When I asked him where his books were, he replied, "I got two book. This is Deshon book!" Terry's oral language follows the syntax and rule bound system Dandy (1991) calls "Black communication." Plurality is expressed once in a sentence, usually by number. As a speaker of Standard English, I might say, "I have two books. This is Deshon's book." Plurality in Standard English can be expressed in the noun, verb and adjective. If I perceive the way I communicate as "correct" and discount Terry's language construction, I am framing my expectations for him as a language learner from a deficit model, meaning his language is somehow deficient. Perceiving a child from a deficit model is a serious threat to accelerated progress in a Reading Recovery program. Additionally, the deficit model may hinder the development of communicative competence necessary for success in school.

Keeping in mind that we as teachers set the patterns of language use in our lessons and the students are the ones that take them aboard (Clay, 1998), we must constantly monitor our assumptions regarding variations in language that manifest themselves in our discourse. Our goal is to develop the communicative competence that is related to success in school with children who may have already experienced frustration and are hesitant to talk to a teacher.

Discourse Patterns

In order to monitor our assumptions it is critical that we take careful records of the conversational patterns we create in our lessons and note when they are successful and when and why they may break down. If a child is reluctant to talk, it may be related to the typical interactional patterns found in school. How we use language in the setting of school is entrenched in our discourse pattern; it takes a conscious effort to move away from potentially limiting patterns and explore new ones.

During the interaction described in the introduction, I unknowingly limited the conversation with Terry and his opportunities to use language. Two patterns of classroom discourse that frequently surface in our talk are the IRE sequence (Mehan, 1979) and pseudo questions (Barns, Britton, & Torbe, 1969). Both patterns have a place in our interactions with children, but become troublesome when they dominate the interactions. IRE is a three-part structure:

(a) teacher's initiation (I);
(b) child's reply (R);
(c) teacher's evaluation (Mehan, 1979).

Here is an example from a lesson prior to my careful inventory:

(I) Did they catch Dan the flying man?
(R) Yes
(E) You're right. They did.

The example also illustrates what Barns et al. (1969) called pseudo questions, where the teacher knows the answers to the questions she is asking. Where else but school do we make a habit of asking questions when we already know the answer?

After considering what may get in the way of Terry's learning, I decided a change was in order. I consciously moved to patterns which might facilitate Terry developing communicative competence related to school.

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Characteristics of good communication

The characteristics of good communication may serve as a guide to think about how we might use conversation as a language learning tool. Clay (1998) describes characteristics of good communication, assuming that speakers and listeners are like teachers and students.

Speakers

a) The speaker has to get the attention of the listener.
b) The speaker has to be sensitive to the listener, observing the listener to look for signs that he or she is understanding you.
c) The message has to be adapted to the context or situation.
d) The speaker has to listen when it is his or her turn to listen.

Listeners

a) Listeners judge whether or not they are getting the message.
b) Listeners recognize when meaning has been lost.
c) Listeners can let the speaker know the meaning has been lost.
d) Listeners can ask for additional information. (Clay, 1998)

I used these characteristics to analyze a conversation with one of my students, Kristina, after she read one my favorite stories, *Dan the Flying Man.* In the story, Dan flies over the city taunting the people to catch him. Finally they catch him and he takes to the air with them on his heels. As you read this interaction, think about what makes it different from the IRE and pseudo-question approaches. What is Kristina learning about language?

Nancy: I like how Dan teases everyone. What do you think?
Kristina: (pause) Ya, he's laughing at them. (pause) He's flying so high so they can't grab his feet.
Nancy: Well, what about the end?
Kristina: I think he wanted them to catch him!
Nancy: I've never thought about that before, Dan must be a pretty smart guy!
Kristina: Ya, like me.

This simple interaction during familiar reading between Kristina and me contains several important conditions that apply to good communication.

Using these conditions, we can analyze the interactions and see how Kristina and I are moving in and out of roles as speaker and listener, negotiating the construction of meaning, in ways that are not typical of an IRE or pseudo question type interaction. I initiated the conversation with the goal of connecting the meanings of her life to the meaning of the text, thus emphasizing meaning as a critical source of information when reading.

Initially I was the ***speaker*** getting her attention through commenting on what I thought about the book then asking what she thought. Kristina as the ***listener*** acknowledges that she is getting the message by agreeing with me. Then, I turned into a ***listener*** when I didn't understand what she meant by saying the people couldn't grab Dan's feet, when in fact in the story they did. I let her know this through asking her a question to get more information. Then as a ***speaker,*** she realized I didn't understand her and explained she thought Dan wanted the people to catch him. As a ***listener***, I judged I got the message so I shifted to a speaker and adapted my response to the context and the situation, and followed her lead, saying I never thought about it that way before and asserting he must be a smart guy. Finally Kristen as a ***listener*** judges she understands what I mean, and turns into a ***speaker*** and takes the opportunity to tell me how smart she is, taking into account the context. She likely wouldn't say that out on the playground with her friends; this is evidence of her adapting her response to mine.

Purposeful Conversation as a Discourse Pattern

Conversation has the potential to be a "tool" for language learning and developing communicative competence during Reading Recovery lessons. We consciously direct children's behaviors to help them construct new understandings regarding language. This is how the conversations in lessons may differ from those in which we engage in other places in schools. Armed with an understanding of the nature of language learning, we deliberately create opportunities through our discourse patterns.

In my own teaching, the sample conversation reflects the teacher and the student moving in and out of the roles of speaker and listener in meaningful and purposeful conversations. Through the discourse pattern we help children construct new understandings as they relate to the oral and printed language system.

Extending and Shaping vs. Questioning

How can we help children learn language, through language, and about language simultaneously without unknowingly limiting learning opportunities? If we think about our role as a listener and a speaker, using language to extend and shape children's semantic and syntactic systems, we have a place to begin. We can elicit language by convincing the child that he or she has something important to say and we are there to listen.

Children who have developed oral communicative competence in school may easily figure out what the teacher wants when the questions begin. It is critical we acknowledge the competence of diverse children whose strengths may be cloaked by our assumptions. Eliciting meaning may be as simple as an invitation to talk about something or tell about something, rather than ask questions. With passive speakers we may need to monitor our teaching for ***listening*** and give the child verbal and non-verbal feedback that signals what the child has to say is important.

Terry, the child in the introduction who refused to talk to

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me, later came around when I realized how typical classroom discourse was interfering with his learning. I watched him on the playground and asked his mother if he talked at home. She said he never shut his mouth. He was communicatively competent at home, but it was my responsibility to help him learn to be communicatively competent in school.

Because Terry's oral language structures differed from mine, it was even more critical that we have meaningful stretches of conversations. I knew Terry had been to the dentist because of extensive dental work and I decided to approach composing from a different stance, the stance of a listener. As you read, think about how and what Terry is learning about language.

Nancy: Over spring break I had to go to the dentist and get a root canal. You've been there. Right?
Terry: Ya
Nancy : Tell me about your dentist.
Terry: He stick it in and it hurt.
Nancy: uhhh, huh ... . (nodding)
Terry: Right there, see? (Sticking his finger in his mouth)
Nancy: ya (nodding)
Terry: Where he stick you?
Nancy: The dentist stuck a shiny little pick in the top of my mouth. It didn't hurt...Tell me more about the dentist.
Terry: It hurt. My mom make me go and she say you don't brush your teeth right.
Nancy: How do you brush your teeth now?
Terry: My teeth, I brush every morning and night.
Nancy: Go on ...
Terry: I go all the way to the top and all the way to the bottom. I wash it off. It's clean.
Nancy: You've told me all about your dentist and brushing your teeth ... . What could we write about that?
Terry: I brush my teeth.
Nancy: All right. You also said something about how and why you brushed your teeth. How could we say it so when your friends read your story today, they will know more about brushing their teeth.
Terry: My mom make me brush my teeth
Nancy: Oh, really ...
Terry: Every day!
(After writing the story, Terry rereads and adds to the story)
Terry: My mom make me brush my teeth every day and night.
Nancy: I really think your story will help me remember to brush my teeth.

During this purposeful conversation I helped Terry begin to develop the communicative competence necessary for school. The evidence lies in how I helped him learn language, learn through language, and learn about language.

I ***elicited*** language from Terry in order for him to learn about language. Then I encouraged his responses through listening and communicating to him that what he had to say was important. 'Tell me more' and 'Say more' are different from shooting questions, and they encouraged him to produce more oral text. Terry learned language through my response although it was syntactically different. We moved in and out of stick and stuck which demonstrated examples of trying out the structures of language.

I ***extended*** and ***elaborated*** his responses without negating them or asking another demanding question every time. Terry asked, "Where he stick you?", and I extended his response with more complex sentence structure without negating his personal structure. I 'upped the ante' in terms of meaning and syntax.

The purpose of eliciting, extending, and elaborating his language was not so we would have more words to problem-solve; the issue was language learning. I taught him about language by eliciting more complex language structures. I connected him to purpose for his writing and the need to communicate with print.

Extending language means talking to the child and acting as a listener and a speaker. Through moving in and out of those roles, we can elicit meaningful oral text from the child. I am learning to observe and think about how Terry is constructing and adapting his existing oral language system to that of school. If you examine changes over time in children's writing in lessons, you can see the potential that conversation has to help children develop more complex oral language and communicative competence for school. Kristina's initial stories were simple sentences, "I want to eat some gummy bears." By the end of her program, she was writing more syntactically complex sentences like, "My brother John was shooting a BB gun at the stop sign. He said, 'Don't tell Mom.'"

Conclusion

Through analyzing the discourse in my lessons, I have pushed the boundaries of my own learning. I encourage you to ask yourself some tough questions about how you create language learning opportunities that facilitate the construction of communicative competence.

1. How much talk are you doing and how much talk is the child doing?
2. How many questions do you ask that you already know the answer?
3. How much time do you give for the student to respond?
4. How do you show the child you are listening through verbal and non-verbal messages?
5. Is the child asking any questions?
6. How do you elicit, extend, and elaborate the child's language while validating the construction of meaning?

Children construct communicative competence necessary for success in school through language learning in Reading Recovery lessons. Some discourse patterns may help or hinder this process. One way to push the

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boundaries of your own learning is to check on your assumptions through examining patterns of language in your own lessons.

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(Specific Document)

I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: Language Patterns that may Help or Hinder Learning: Taking an Inventory of Your Assumptions. (Network News)

Author(s): Nancy Anderson

Corporate Source: Reading Recovery Council of North America

Publication Date: Spring 1999

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