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Talking to learn: The hidden curriculum of a fifth-grade science class

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ABSTRACT

Grounded in sociocultural perspectives on language and learning, this study explores a recurring discourse event—student-led presentations in a US Grade 5 Science classroom—in order to better understand how discursive practices of a classroom might shape and challenge the learning experience of ESL learners. Findings show that discursive practices are developed not only from the wider cultural contexts of the discipline of science, but also from the local, immediate activity. Accordingly, academic challenges during the discourse events are products of local culture, as well as the broader academic field. The findings of this study point to the lack of transparency in the presentation of rules and norms of practice and expose the need for teachers to constantly self-evaluate their practice to increase this transparency in rules and norms of the classroom in order to promote the socialization of English learners into the community.

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1. Introduction

One of the biggest challenges many schools face today is the rapid increase in the number of learners of English as a second language (henceforth ELs). Although most young ELs become conversationally fluent within a year or two, they still grapple with the challenges of achieving academic success (Cummins, 1981; Klesmer, 1994). The academic achievement gap between ELs and non-ELs persists indicating the need to better understand the challenges ELs face.

Researchers have suggested that the difficulties ELs encounter in subject classes may not entirely stem from the cognitive demands of the subject matter, but rather, from the presence of unfamiliar features of academic practice and language that hinder ELs' ability to apply abstract reasoning or to present their knowledge successfully (e.g., Christie, 1999; Fang, Schleppegrell, & Cox, 2006). Recognizing the demands and significance of academic language in subject classes, some researchers have proposed that providing explicit descriptions of specific language functions that make academic language more obvious for learners would increase ELs' access to the academic community and promote their success in school. Studies have described the language forms and registers of schooling contexts (Fang et al., 2006; Martin, 2002; Schleppegrell, 2004) and offered tools for talking about grade-level texts beyond the strategies for basic literacy (Lukin & Webster, 2005; Williams, 2004, 2005). These studies have helped teachers to identify the specific linguistic features of academic language and make them visible to ELs.

Despite the contributions made by these studies, justifiable objections can be raised about their neglect of the social nature of language learning. These studies have typically focused only on a set of rules about language use and often have neglected

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the messy processes through which ELs struggle to negotiate opportunities for participation, access, and membership. Consequently, learner difficulties involved during contextual interactions are much less understood or readily resolved. In this regard, Luke (1996) contended that this approach has shown "omissions of elements which were central to Halliday and colleagues' initial project: to build a sociologically theorized and politically responsible linguistics with attendant domains of application" (p. 334). This criticism underscores the importance of an ongoing discussion about how texts and discursive practices serve to manifest ideology. The investigation of language demands in subject classes could be advanced by the incorporation of sociocultural interactions that occur in academic practice within specific situations and as shown by people holding various levels of power and authority. This study seeks to explore a recurring discourse event in a Grade 5 Science classroom in order to understand how discursive practices of a subject class influence and challenge the learning processes of ELs.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Situated learning

This study is broadly grounded in sociocultural perspectives on language and learning (e.g., Lantolf, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Sociocultural theorists emphasize socially constructed knowledge by contending that learning is a process constructed through collaboration and interaction by participants[1] in a situated context (Vygotsky, 1978). From this perspective, learning entails increased participation in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In other words, newcomers to a community gain access to necessary resources for learning and advance their skills and understanding by participating with others in culturally organized activities and growing relationships within a community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1995). As they participate in the activity, their knowledge grows, and they move from peripheral to fuller participation. Therefore, learning and membership are interrelated because "learning is not only a condition for membership, but is itself an evolving form of membership" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 55). Thus, learning is an inherently social and culturally mediated practice. To understand the learning process of ELs in subject classes, we need to ask, "What kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place?" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 14).

Learning, as seen as an increasing participation in a community of practices, involves appropriation of particular patterns of acting, as well as appropriation of systematic relations to each other, as defined by the culture of the community. In particular, appropriation of various semiotic (meaning-making) tools (e.g., language, gesture, symbols, etc.) is important for successful learning, because such tools provide the grounds for community members to perform meaningful actions (Lemke, 1990). Researchers (Kress, Jewitt, Ogborn, & Tsatsarelis, 2001; Lemke, 2003) have illustrated that one's use of semiotic resources is intentional and normative, because discursive practices are influenced by social relationships and norms of the context or the social group. Therefore, figuring out the cultural meaning of semiotic resources in a given context is prerequisite to appropriate use. For this reason, learning about a particular subject area is considered the same as learning to use that domain's discourse (Lemke, 2000).

While language is considered the most powerful social tool in both the meaning-making and learning processes (Lemke, 2000; Mortimer & Scott, 2003; Wells, 1999), research indicates that a variety of semiotic tools, including "actional, visual, and linguistic resources" (Kress et al., 2001, p. 33) are used in a classroom community. In particular, learning in the field of science involves developing the ability to integrate and use these various semiotic resources in appropriate ways (Lemke, 2003). Therefore, an investigation of the learning process in a science classroom should not neglect to study classroom interactions and practices that help or hinder ELs from appropriating or learning to use the semiotic resources required by the classroom community.

Theories that emphasize learning through participation warn that ELs' learning processes can be facilitated or hindered depending on the way that artifacts and practices are organized to foster both transparency and access to certain resources and activities. Lave and Wenger (1991) defined the term *transparency* as "a way of organizing activities that make their meaning visible" (p. 105). This term implies a form of membership in a community that provides access to information and gives meaning through the negotiation of identities of participation. Lave and Wenger emphasize that the transparency of artifacts and practices in a community may not be guaranteed to learners. Although transparent norms and explicit practices may facilitate learners' participation in activities and engage their membership in the community, most often, such socialization occurs through routine participation in semiotically mediated practices without the dissemination of explicit instructions. For example, after exploring the discourse socialization of six non-native-English-speaking graduate students through the performance of an academic presentation, Zappa-Hollman (2007) found that few instructors provided explicit scaffolding or modeling to help students' performance on oral assignments. Similarly, in her study of five graduate students at a public university in the United States, Kim (2011) suggested that the cultural values and goals of discursive practices, such as are found in presentation and small-group discussions in subject classes, were not clear to international students and became a source of difficulty. Thus, these

[1] Participants' names are pseudonyms.

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