



The acquisition of discourse competence: Evidence from preschoolers' peer talk

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ABSTRACT

In uncovering the mechanisms underlying language acquisition, developmental studies have tended to overlook the acquisitional relevance of child–child discourse. The purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which the acquisition of discourse competence with a special focus on metalanguage can be traced back to supportive interactional structures inherent in preschoolers' peer talk. Thus, a so far neglected acquisitional context is investigated with respect to a domain of language acquisition which is highly relevant for classroom participation and school success. Based on naturally occurring child–child interactions, the analyses examine how the participants establish, maintain, and direct ongoing discourse. The findings argue that peer talk has to be considered a rich acquisitional context offering children a platform to try out means of metalanguage that in adult–child interaction are often reserved for the adult. The results are discussed in relation to the question as to how children may benefit from verbal models supplied by adults but incorporated in and through specific interactional patterns of peer culture.

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1. Introduction

Verbal interaction is not only a matter of gathering and exchanging information, but also of organizing and structuring the discourse. The tasks of the participants include, for example, the negotiation of turn-taking, the clarification of misunderstanding and non-understanding and the maintenance of the conversation. One of the means to manage these tasks is offering explicit comments about the ongoing discourse, which has been conceptualized as “metalanguage” (Jaworski, Coupland, & Galasinski, 2004) or “talk about talk” (Aukrust, 2004). It is only recently that research on first language acquisition has focused on the child's emerging ability to organize discourse by this means (e.g. Aukrust, 2001; Blum-Kulka, 1997; Branco, 2005; Branco & Valsiner, 2004; Stude, 2007, 2013), which is remarkable given the twofold relevance of this particular dimension of discourse competence for educational settings. First, classroom interaction and learning processes are organized and steered mainly by metalanguage: a mastery of metalanguage both on the receptive and productive levels enables students to participate in classroom discourse and can therefore be conceptualized as a significant contributor to school success (Phillips Galloway, Stude, & Uccelli, submitted for publication). Second, metalinguistic abilities such as talking about and reflecting on language define an independent educational objective in learning, and constitute a central aim in language teaching (Roberts, 2011). It follows that the diagnostic competence of teachers (Karing, Pfost, & Artelt, 2011) should comprise knowledge about the different stages in the acquisition of metalinguistic abilities as well as about resources that help students to enter the next developmental stages.

The present study explores how the early development of discourse competence with a special focus on metalinguistic abilities – defined as the competence to comment explicitly on language and its use – can be traced back to supportive interactional structures. Metalinguistic comments about the ongoing discourse may concern any aspect of language, whether phonological, syntactic, semantic or pragmatic (see also Stude, 2007). This study uses natural interactions that occur in the

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preschool classroom and investigates specifically whether peer interaction among preschoolers should be considered influential in the acquisition of metalinguistic abilities. In focusing on a developmental stage that is located before school enrolment, the analyses are in particular meant to broaden our understanding of early acquisitional processes that may lay the foundation of later school-related discourse competence and, by implication, also of educational inequalities.

2. The acquisition of talk about talk in different contexts

This section provides a short overview of previous research on the acquisition of discourse competence with a special focus on metalanguage. After having specified the concept of social context that is taken as a basis for the following remarks (2.1), two different fields of research will be discussed: first, research on peer talk, including the characteristics of peer culture among children (2.2), and, second, the development of metalinguistic abilities (2.3). The latter has so far scarcely focused on talk between children, and even though the analyses presented later focus strictly on children's peer interaction, I will therefore include a review of findings gained from studies on adult-child talk about talk.

2.1. Social interaction as an arena for language acquisition – some preliminary thoughts on the concept of context

Several approaches have emphasized the relevance of social interaction between adults and children to the process of language acquisition on the lexical, syntactic and discourse levels. The relevant studies assume that, mostly in dyadic situations, the adult is intuitively sensitive to the child's current abilities and offers capacity-specific help within Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (e.g. Bruner, 1978; Garton, 1992; Quasthoff, 1997). From this perspective, the process of language acquisition is embedded in and at the same time promoted by the social context and its fine-tuned supportive interactional structures.

In recent years, the concept of social context for language acquisition has been expanded by including forms of multiparty discourse and, above all, conversation among children (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2004; Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2007; Morek, 2014—in this issue; Quasthoff & Wild, in this issue). However, due to the absence of a more capable adult and the assumable lack of scaffolding, it seems reasonable to question why child-child interaction should contribute to language development. This study aims to demonstrate that interactional structures, inherent especially in peer interaction, offer children unique opportunities to learn about language and its use. In the adult's absence especially, children are challenged to organize discourse by themselves. Children can therefore be expected to gain valuable experiences when interacting with their peers (see also Blum-Kulka, Hamo, & Habib, 2010; Hamo, Blum-Kulka, & Hachohen, 2004).

Basically, the following analyses are premised on the assumption that social context is not a static, predefined or externally given factor, but should be conceptualized as dynamically, i.e. interactively established by the interactants themselves. The creation of meaning is, then, an active and collective process (Gaskins, Miller, & Corsaro, 1992), in which participants continuously provide "contextualization cues" (Gumperz, 1982). This means that a central objective of this study is to reconstruct on a microstructural level how children continually display their mutual understanding of the ongoing discourse.

From this interactive embeddedness can be derived a second conceptual aspect of social context, that as an arena for language acquisition. To the degree that participants differ in how they establish context, we can assume – and this has already been proved in studies on family interaction – that children gain systematically different interactive experiences in their process of language acquisition (Morek, 2012; Quasthoff & Kern, 2007). In other words, we should be cautious not to assume that *any* type of interaction pattern holds the same acquisitional potential. It is more probable that different patterns constitute various micro-cultural milieus that impact the child's discourse acquisition (Quasthoff & Wild, in this issue). On this reading, the high degree of variance between micro-cultural milieus might offer an explanation for the inequalities in educational success.

2.2. Children's peer talk

Following Kyratzis (2004), the study of children's peer talk consists of several phases: in the first phase a discourse-centered approach was hypothesized (e.g. Ervin-Tripp & Mitchell-Kernan, 1977) and expanded by a second phase which focused on the child's social competence (e.g. Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). Currently, the approach considers children as active agents in their own peer culture (e.g. Cook-Gumperz & Corsaro, 1986). The main concerns in children's peer culture can be seen as forming an alliance with peers (e.g. Katz, 2004; Kyratzis, Marx, & Wade, 2001), establishing power as well as forming a hierarchy among peer group members (e.g. Goodwin, 2002; Kyratzis & Tanm, 2010). Especially in their attempt to achieve power in the peer group, preschool children have been observed to "emulate powerful adult roles, privileged to speak with high-status control act forms" (Kyratzis, 2004, p. 630). This observation illustrates how adult culture and norms impact children's peer talk. Hamo et al. (2004) therefore reasonably consider children's peer talk as a space permitting two opportunities. They explicate their view as follows:

"The first space is created within childhood culture; it is the sociocultural arena within which children negotiate meanings and relationships unique to their local age culture such as issues of the division between the real and the imaginary, notions of time and space, social norms and gender identities. [...] The second space is created by a focus on talk as an arena for development; it is peer talk considered as an opportunity for the development of discursive skills as a stepping stone for adult-like uses of language and for gaining membership in adult cultures." (p. 73f.)

The study of the development of discourse competence and conversational management abilities in particular has been most evident in the context of children's role play. From the time children are three years of age, they use specialized registers and change their voices in accordance with their role (e.g. an authoritative style for parents, deep voices for males) (e.g. Bose, 2003;

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