Constructing social and communicative worlds — The role of peer-interactions in preadolescents' discursive development

Miriam Morek *

Dortmund University of Technology, Joseph-von-Fraunhofer-Str. 20, 44227 Dortmund, Germany

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This article offers a comparative analysis of explanatory discourse in informal, spontaneous peer-interactions of twelve German cliques of preadolescents, and discusses their possible role in children's discursive development. Findings demonstrate a sharp contrast in the occurrence of explanations among peers depending on their social backgrounds. Preadolescents from privileged milieus skillfully deal with contextual framings and global constraints linked to explanations, and may therefore be assumed to use, adopt, and expand their explanatory discourse skills – and especially their contextualization skills – through social interactions with peers. Their counterparts from rather deprived homes, on the other hand, follow communicative practices (e.g. teasing) which prevent the occurrence of explanatory talk, thereby depriving themselves of valuable learning opportunities.

1. Introduction

Though there is a broad agreement that students' educational success or failure heavily depends on their social background (cf., Quasthoff & Wild, 2014-in this issue), the role of peers in (re)producing these inequalities has hardly come into view. Rather, the focus so far has been on *families* and the economic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) they bring with them to facilitate their children's achievement at school. Likewise, language acquisition research has long been concentrating on the conduciveness of particular patterns in dyadic interactions between children and more competent interlocutors, deliberately disregarding peers as a potential acquisitional resource (cf., Nicolopoulou, 2002). Recent studies, however, have begun to explore peer-interactions on the understanding that they may indeed afford an autonomous site for the acquisition of discourse competencies from an early age on (e.g., Stude, 2014-in this issue; Zadunaisky-Ehrlich & Blum-Kulka, 2010). However, little is known about how interactional routines in peer-groups differ as a function of social milieu (Hradil, 2006), and about how those routines may vary in fostering children's development of those discursive skills which are of particular relevance for the context of schooling (e.g., explanatory or argumentative skills, Zadunaisky-Ehrlich & Blum-Kulka, 2010).

In view, therefore, of this special issue's objective to illuminate the grounding of educational inequalities in students' everyday language practices in their respective agencies of socialization, this article offers a comparative analysis of explanatory discourse in informal, spontaneous peer-interactions of twelve German cliques and discusses their possible role in preadolescents' discursive development. The article starts with a sketch of the nature and acquisition of discourse practices and explores the peer-group as a potential context for acquiring discourse competence (2). After presenting the general characteristics of explanatory discourse practices (3), and introducing the data and the method used (4), an overview of the communicative repertoires of the peer-groups represented in the corpus is given (5), followed by a presentation of exploratory findings on

---

* Tel.: +49 231 9700511.
   E-mail address: miriam.morek@tu-dortmund.de.

explanatory practices in the twelve groups (6). In a final section, I discuss the study's relevance for understanding the formation and consolidation of discursive competencies and educational inequality in relation to students' social backgrounds (7).

2. Acquiring discourse competence

Since we do not communicate with other people by simply producing words and sentences (Hausendorf & Quasthoff, 1996, p. 3) but rather by drawing upon socially consolidated, expectable interactional structures above the sentence level (e.g. communicative genres, Günthner & Knoblauch, 1995), a child's essential task in developing communicative competence is to learn how to participate in such 'larger' units of talk-in-interaction, such as narratives, explanations, and arguments. Such *discourse competencies* encompass, as Quasthoff (2011) empirically reconstructed, abilities in three distinct but interconnected dimensions:

1) *Contextualization*. Children need to learn how to deal with interactional structures above the sentence level (i.e. 'global structures') and act according to the situation at hand. 'Contextualization' encompasses the ability to a) discern points within talk-in-interaction at which such units are structurally expected; b) establish such conversational contexts themselves.
2) *Textualization*. When a story, an explanation, an argument etc. is to be produced, the interlocutor needs to build a locally and globally coherent unit which exhibits a certain genre-specific organizational structure.
3) *Marking*. Also, children progress in employing verbal, paraverbal and nonverbal means to establish coherence and 'mark' the respective genre (i.e., direct speech in stories).

Interactionist studies have persuasively demonstrated how systematic patterns in adult–child interactions offer a communicatively founded, intuitive, "support system" for children's acquisition of discourse competence (Hausendorf & Quasthoff, 1992, 1996). In their conversations with children, more competent interlocutors make extra efforts to keep the communication flowing and "scaffold" (Bruner, 1983) children in solving the conversational tasks at hand. Theoretically, routinized interactional experiences in children's homes – which have been demonstrated to differ sharply in different families (e.g., Domenech & Krah, 2014-in this issue; Heller, 2012, 2014-in this issue; Morek, 2012; Quasthoff & Krah, 2012) – can be regarded as *external* resources which may enhance or exhibit children's expansion of discourse skills in conjunction with children's *internal* (i.e. cognitive, linguistic) resources (Quasthoff, 2011).

While peers have been recognized as powerful agencies of socialization (Corsaro, 2011; Harring, Böhm-Kasper, Rohlfs, & Palentien, 2010), the potential of peer-interactions as an external resource for discourse skills has only just begun to come to the notice of researchers. There is, however, a rather long ethnographic tradition of analyzing peer talk for its role in building "local social organization within their own peer-group communities and index appropriate and inappropriate behavior for the local peer group" (Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2012, p. 381). These peer language socialization studies (Corsaro, 2011; Cromdal, 2009; Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2007, 2012) and studies in linguistic ethnography (Maybin, 2006) have provided detailed descriptions of language practices by means of which children accomplish social and developmental tasks such as creating hierarchies and differentiation within the group, building identities and distancing themselves from outsiders, and negotiating social and moral norms. With practices such as ritual insults, mockery, teasing, gossip and story-telling (e.g., Corsaro, 2011; Schmidt, 2004; Spreckels, 2006) predominantly examined, the focus has clearly been on conversational activity characteristic of informal interactions among intimates.

However, peer-interactions have increasingly started to become the focus of attention in language acquisition research (c.f., the seminal special issue 'The potential of peer talk' edited by Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2004, several contributions to a *First Language* special issue on 'Conversation and Language Acquisition' edited by Veneziano, 2010). Recent studies in this field focus on narrative (Nicolopoulou, 2002), explanatory (Aukrust, 2004; Blum-Kulka, Hamo, & Habib, 2010) and argumentative (Haworth, 2001; Zadunaisky-Ehrlich & Blum-Kulka, 2010) discourse skills, as well as metalinguistic competence (Stude, 2014-in this issue). By and large, therefore, the traditional focus of peer-talk research has been extended to include academic language competencies (cf., Morek & Heller, 2012).

Following Blum-Kulka and colleagues, from a theoretical point of view peer-interactions can be regarded as a "double opportunity space that provides children with opportunities for negotiating issues of immediate childhood culture concern […], while simultaneously acting as an arena for the development of pragmatic skills" (Zadunaisky-Ehrlich & Blum-Kulka, 2010, p. 310). In the main, four major characteristics of peer-interactions have been identified that underline this potential of peer-interactions: 1) its symmetric participation structure; 2) its challenges in the absence of adults; 3) its peer-specific goal-orientation, and 4) its potential confrontation with "otherness".

The first aspect is supported by Rogoff (1990), who argues that the interaction with peers, who neither possess the same social superiority nor the knowledge and (linguistic) capability as adults, can provide a reciprocal exchange of ideas free of intimidation and, therefore, foster children's cognitive and linguistic development (cf., also Aukrust, 2004; O'Neill, Main, & Ziemski, 2009). If it is accepted that learning-by-doing is a major developmental mechanism in discourse acquisition, then the greater interactional 'freedom' among equals may provide a training ground and "safe rehearsal space" (Haworth, 2001) for discourse practices of various kinds.

However, free communication with peers goes hand in hand with the second of the aspects mentioned above, i.e. the greater communicative and interactional *challenges*: in the absence of adults, who pre-structure, guide or scaffold conversations with children, children are required to autonomously master the communicative and interactional tasks they set themselves. They have to choose and negotiate conversational topics, jointly establish and agree upon certain