"How much You wanna bet?": Examining the role of positioning in the development of L2 learner interactional competencies in the content classroom

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of positioning in the development of interactional competence of a Latino English Learner in a third grade mathematics classroom. Data is drawn from a three-year longitudinal study that examined the role of interaction in language and content learning for English Learners in content classrooms. Informed by positioning theory, this study draws upon multimodal analysis to provide microanalytic longitudinal mapping of the classroom interactional architecture, including the multimodal fluencies the student brings to bear on challenging interactions with peers. Findings suggest that the positioning practices constituting the classroom interactional architecture are inextricably intertwined with L2 learner access to classroom interactions that influence the trajectory of development of IC.

Introduction

Gaining competence in a second language is a challenging endeavor. To be considered a competent communicator, second language (L2) learners must learn to orchestrate multiple semiotic resources for purposes of power and agency across dynamic interactional terrain. For L2 learners in K-12 educational contexts, these competencies are often being developed in the midst of classroom interactional architecture that can promote or constrain access to the very communicative practices necessary for language acquisition and learning (Cazden, 2001; Cekaite, 2007; Cekaite, 2009; DaSilva Iddings, 2005; McKay & Wong, 1996; Mehan, 1979; Mehan, 1985; Chval, Pinnow, & Thomas, 2015). Given this, the development of interactional competence (IC) in L2 learners is highly contingent upon learning to position oneself effectively in order to enter into classroom interactions in ways that both promote IC and are evidence of IC (Hawkins, 2005; Hall, 1995). This is due in large part to the nature of IC wherein communicative ability is both a requirement for interaction and also evidence of competence (Lee, 2006; Hall, 2010).

In this vein, both positioning and IC draw on the orchestration of multimodal resources for purposes of agency in interactions (Pinnow, 2011; Davies & Harré, 1999). Language is only one such resource with other semiotic resources (e.g., physical control of space and time, gesture, gaze) playing pivotal roles in the multimodal fluencies necessary for achieving agentive positions that foster development of IC. This is an important point as it promotes the view of L2 learners as those

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navigating dynamic interactional terrain in order to locate avenues for agency through the orchestration of multiple semiotic resources, which provides insight to their capabilities rather than viewing these learners as deficient in some way (Pinnow, 2011; Martin & Evaldsson, 2012; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Van Lier, 2008).

However, there is relatively little research that provides microanalytic longitudinal mapping of the positioning experiences of L2 learners in K-12 classrooms, including shifts in multimodal positioning capabilities of these learners (see Cekaite, 2013; Mökkönen, 2012). Furthermore, there is also little research examining the classroom experiences of Latina/o English Learners (ELs) in rural industrial communities in the United States (i.e., rural communities that have been traditionally agriculturally-based but in recent decades have been reshaped by industries such as poultry facilities and textile mills) (Pinnow, 2013). While urban contexts of schooling for Latinos have been examined consistently, the rural industrial landscape has been significantly neglected although Latino population growth has been higher in nonmetropolitan areas in the U.S. over the last 20 years, with 70% of Mexican immigrants educated in rural and suburban schools (Saenz & Torres, 2003; Kandel & Cromartie, 2004).

This paper draws on positioning theory and research in IC to examine the role of positioning in the development of IC in a Latino EL in a third grade mathematics classroom in a rural industrial community in the U.S. In examining the role of positioning in the development of IC, we first delineate positioning theory and then examine its relationship to research on IC in L2 learners.

Positioning and L2 learner interactional competencies

Positioning theory addresses the psychology of interactions through microanalysis of the role of rights and duties in the architecture of social action (Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009). In positioning theory, interactions are composed of *positions*, *storylines*, and *speech acts*, with positioning the practice "whereby people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines" (Davies & Harré, 1999, p. 37) in the local moral order. In this context, the 'moral order' refers to the "the local system of rights, duties, and obligations" (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999, p.1).

Positioning theory emphasizes the social aspect of interactions since positioning capabilities in learners, similar to IC, is both necessary for access to social interactions and evidence of social competencies. Positioning, also like IC, is embodied with learners required to deploy multiple semiotic resources in a changing interactional ecology (Goodwin, 2003). The embodiment of social interactions is a vital aspect of understanding how learners come to understand the local moral order and to interact in ways that promote their own agency and allow them to exploit affordances for learning (Goodwin, 2000, 2007).

Among the triad of positions, storylines, and speech acts, *positions* in classrooms are social in that they can be viewed as the rights and duties that participants are required to carry out in social interactions. Emphasizing the local social aspect of positioning is essential in that, in positioning theory, competence is not located in the individual alone, but in the construction of rights and duties related to the "*local* corpus of sayings and doings" (Harré et al., 2009, p. 6). Thus classroom interaction practices are a platform for establishing and circulating participants' roles, rights, and duties in relation to the local moral order.

Moreover, what participants are considered to be within a local moral order is at least partly contributed to what roles they occupy, and what rights and duties they are able to effectively employ in interactions (Harré et al., 2009). Positions then are a symbolic notion in that a person may position, or be positioned, along a continuum of categories in any given interaction (e.g., decisive or tentative, dominant or submissive, competent or incompetent) (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999). This is not to suggest that individuals *are* these roles or categories unequivocally, or that they can only choose from one binary or another (Anderson, 2009), but that they operate along a continuum of trajectories amidst the space between what they believe about themselves, how they may be constructed by others, and how they display personas and self-advocacy in the local moral order (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999). This is due to the socially constructed nature of positioning in that identities available to members of a local moral order are often contingent upon how others construct them. The cultures and histories present in a classroom shape the identities available to learners and thus impact the affordances for developing and projecting personas in any particular interaction. It should be noted that positioning is not always intentional but can be inadvertent given the dynamism of social interactions. It is through the interplay along a continuum of dynamic categories (e.g., decisive or tentative, dominant or submissive, powerful or powerless) that personal histories and storylines are created, enacted, and negotiated in a local moral order whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Storylines are described as the patterns of interaction that tend to unfold in particular kinds of social arenas (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). The patterns constituting storylines consist of multiple semiotic resources (e.g., language, gesture, gaze, physical movement) harnessed and deployed to evoke existing narratives known to interactants, or new narratives that may not be known to all interactants. Storylines are a particularly helpful construct in examining classroom interactions as they address the dynamic unfolding of social interactions that can make prior or new narratives available to participants, and where the histories of classroom interactions contribute to future narratives available to participants (Yamakawa, Forman, & Ansell, 2009).

In this vein, *speech acts* are those social actions that are recognized by others as socially significant and thereby contributing to existing and new storylines. Speech acts include not only spoken language but also other semiotic resources employed