



The construction of ‘academic language’ in German classrooms: Communicative practices and linguistic norms in ‘morning circles’[☆]



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ABSTRACT

In our paper, we take a constructivist approach to early forms of ‘academic language’, based on a conversation analytic framework. Adopting an interactional linguistic framework that is based on ethnomethodological and conversation analytic theoretical thinking, we aim to describe the social and linguistic norms that emerge in so-called ‘morning circles’, a highly ritualised interactional routine that transfers part of the interactional responsibility to the children and at the same time teaches the prerequisites for specific communicative practices. As morning circles are turned into language teaching lessons on a regular basis, we describe the linguistic features that emerge as learning objects, and some of the learning practices in which they are embedded. We will argue that language learning practices are situated practices, connecting the use of linguistic forms with ideologies of linguistic and social appropriateness. Our analysis is based on video recordings of three sessions in a first grade class in a primary school in a medium sized town in Germany, which have been transcribed and qualitatively analysed.

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Introduction

Academic language (German ‘Bildungssprache’; henceforth AL), a term employed to describe those linguistic competences that are considered essential for academic success, is today an important concept in German pedagogical discourse, and thus has considerable impact on current education policy. In particular, children with German as their second language and children with low social economic status (SES) are said to suffer from severe difficulties in school, because they do not possess the basic literacy practices that are seen as part of ‘academic language’ (Feilke, 2012; Gogolin, 2010; Gogolin &

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Lange, 2010; Halliday, 1993; Schleppegrell, 2004). In addition, the last PISA survey revealed once again that children with a migration background are systematically disadvantaged in school (Klieme et al., 2010).³

However, the effects of the scientific and political debate are not yet systematically reflected in the school curricula: the term ‘AL’ occurs neither in the national education standards (‘Bildungsstandards’), nor in the core curricula of the ‘Bundesländer’.⁴ What is more, even though several programmes for language support have been developed and tested in the past decade,⁵ a survey, supported by the Mercator Foundation, showed not only that most teachers systematically neglect language support, they even also feel unable to provide it (Becker-Mrotzek, Hentschel, Hippmann, & Linnemann, 2012).

Apart from such primarily practical and training-related difficulties, which we can only mention in passing, linguistic descriptions of AL remain oriented to formal and semantic features of language (especially syntax and lexis). However, language use in learning situations is not linked just to specific contexts, which would imply that different learning situations require different linguistic forms and lexical items (cf. e.g. Schleppegrell, 2004); language use and language learning are both deeply embedded in on-going social practices: children learn in, and through, social practices. Looking at these practices is essential for a greater understanding of both acquisition processes on the one hand, and teaching interactions on the other.

Furthermore, there is hardly any research which addresses the question of which linguistic forms of AL are actually employed in real classroom situations, and how they become learning objects for students (cf. Heller & Morek, 2015; Morek & Heller, 2012).

Given this background, we will attempt to discover which linguistic forms emerge as learning objects in particular classroom settings, and how this takes place. We hope thus to gain an understanding of the linguistic features which emerge as learning objects, and of some of the interactional practices which provide a frame both for their situative use and their acquisition. In so doing, we hope to shed some light on teaching and learning practices related to linguistic forms and additionally to gain insight into teachers’ normative concepts of linguistic competence, especially in the case of primary school pupils and pupils with German as a second language.

We have chosen sessions of a ‘morning circle’ (roughly the equivalent to ‘sharing time’, s.b.) in a primary school class, for two main reasons: Firstly, morning circles do not focus on language but have other goals: the emphasis is usually on “creating a sense of community and developing social and interactional skills” (Yazigi & Seedhouse, 2005, p. 1). Secondly, observing younger learners – primary school pupils, many of them with German as a second language – we hope to identify the initial stages of AL in the following sense: ‘[f]or the majority of children, starting school means new ways of using language. These include using language to accomplish new types of tasks and new expectations for how they will structure what they say’ (Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 21).

To begin, we will give a short overview of linguistic research on ‘academic language’, with an emphasis on the critical discussion of the notion of register; we will then give an account of our own approach to ‘academic language’ in section “Discussing ‘academic language’ in the context of interactional linguistics”. Using interactional linguistic methodology (cf. section “Methods and procedures”), and following a discussion of our data (section “The data”), we will describe the linguistic features which are talked about in the classroom, when and how they become a learning object, and how they are linked on the one hand to social norms and on the other to the situational context (sections “Linguistic forms as learning objects”, “Relating linguistic forms to social norms”, “Adjusting linguistic norms to proficiency levels” and “Social norms as learning objects”). Section “Results and discussion” presents a discussion of the results, first asking whether the linguistic features invoked as learning objects belong to AL (“Learning practices and learning objects: references to AL?”), secondly elaborating on ‘morning circles’ as language learning environments (“The teacher’s and pupils’ category-bound activities: moving from chairing the morning circle to learning language”), and thirdly examining the teacher’s and pupils’ roles in the process of establishing these linguistic features as valid norms (“The ‘morning circle’ as a language learning environment”). In our concluding remarks (section “Concluding remarks”), we will argue that language learning practices are situated practices, connecting the use of linguistic forms with ideologies of linguistic and social appropriateness.

Discussing ‘academic language’ in the context of interactional linguistics

The theoretical background: academic language, language of schooling und ‘Bildungssprache’ in German pedagogic discourse

Schleppegrell makes a distinction between two different registers, both contrasting with everyday language in several respects. ‘Academic language’ describes a register with linguistic characteristics of decontextualisation, explicitness and complexity (Schleppegrell, 2004; see also Heller & Morek, 2015); ‘language of schooling’ refers to the specific register used in classroom interaction. Students need to distinguish both registers “[...] from interactional co-construction in more informal

³ There is, however, a strong correlation between children’s socio-economic background and their outcomes in school. In fact, a recent study shows that it is their socio-economic background that remains the most important factor when the effect of migration background is discounted (cf. Heppt, Dragon, Berendes, Stanat, & Weinert, 2012).

⁴ Matters of education are not centrally coordinated in Germany but are the responsibility of the “Bundesländer”.

⁵ See, e.g., FÖRMIG, which coordinates several language promotion programmes and provides the theoretical background for them (<http://www.foermig.uni-hamburg.de>).

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