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The discursive construction of knowledge and equity in classroom interactions



Michael A. Shepherd*

California State University, Fresno, Department of Linguistics, 5245 N. Backer, M/S PB92, Fresno, CA 93740, USA

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ABSTRACT

Given the established relationship between student participation and learning, an equitable distribution of turns at talk is critically important. This paper examines the discursive strategies teachers use in allocating such turns during teacher-fronted lessons, demonstrating that the predominant strategy in many classrooms—one in which teachers avoid dispreferred (incorrect or inappropriate) responses by soliciting volunteers and nominating only those students who actively seek the floor—is inconducive to the goal of equity insofar as it allocates fewer turns to students who (due to culture, personality, etc.) volunteer less often. It is shown that the advantage of this strategy stems from teachers' use of monologic recitation scripts. Consequently, abandoning such scripts in favor of more dialogic classroom discourse—as has long been recommended—would reduce the desirability of volunteer-based turn allocation, thus freeing teachers to promote an equitable distribution of opportunities for student participation by nominating students regardless of whether they seek the floor.

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Introduction

It has long been recognized that all students can and should play an active role in classroom discourse, including having turns at talk (e.g., Au & Mason, 1983; Emanuelsson & Sahlström, 2008; Griffin & Mehan, 1981; Hiebert et al., 1997). From a social-constructivist perspective, learning takes place through active participation in meaningful exchanges (e.g., Bruner, 1978, 1983; Nuthall, 1997; Pritchard & Woollard, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978), and the relationship between students' participation in such exchanges and their development of knowledge and critical thinking is well established (Christle & Schuster, 2003; Fassinger, 1995; Garside, 1996; Howard & Henney, 1998; Kember & Gow, 1994; Kerssen-Griep, Gayle, & Preiss, 2006; McCroskey, 1977; Voelkl, 1995; Weast, 1996).

Of course, the importance of active student participation in no way diminishes the crucial role of silence and listening, which Schultz (2009) and others have pointed out. Indeed, most in the classroom must be silent in order for talk to be effective. Nevertheless, we should not accept a situation in which some students do a disproportionate share of the 'listening' and others a disproportionate share of the talking. In fact, an equitable distribution of turns at talk is not only morally just but pedagogically necessary, because when some students are prevented from contributing their ideas, everyone's learning is potentially diminished (Fennema, 1990; Hiebert et al., 1997).

* Tel.: +1 559 278 0378.

E-mail address: mshpherd@csufresno.edu

This paper presents a critical examination of the discursive strategies teachers use in allocating turns at talk during teacher-fronted lessons. It is shown that the predominant floor-allocation strategy in many of today's classrooms—Mehan's (1979a) 'invitation to bid,' with which teachers increase the likelihood of eliciting the specific response sought by soliciting volunteers and nominating only those students who actively seek the floor—is inherently inconducive to the goal of equity insofar as it allocates fewer turns to students who (due to culture, personality, etc.) are ill disposed to volunteer. It is further demonstrated that the predominance of this strategy is of relatively recent origin and that the strategy's main interactional advantage stems from the 'monologic' nature (in the sense of Bakhtin, 1984, p. 5ff) of classroom interactions. Ultimately, it is proposed that an independently motivated and long-recommended change in the quality of classroom discourse (making it more 'dialogic,' again in the sense of Bakhtin, 1984, p. 14ff) will facilitate a return to the formerly predominant floor-allocation strategy—Mehan's (1979a) 'individual nomination,' which enables teachers to call on any student at any time. This, in turn, will enable teachers to promote true equity in the distribution of opportunities for student participation and learning.

Theoretical framework

This paper follows Gutierrez and Larson (1994) in blending social theory and critical theory in examining the relationship between teachers' discursive practices and issues of knowledge and equity. Social constructivism views learning as a process of generating knowledge through social interaction (e.g., Bruner, 1978, 1983; Nuthall, 1997; Pritchard & Woollard, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). From this perspective, it comes as no surprise that research has consistently shown a clear relationship between students' active involvement in classroom discourse and their development of knowledge and critical thinking skills (Christle & Schuster, 2003; Fassinger, 1995; Garside, 1996; Howard & Henney, 1998; Kember & Gow, 1994; Kerksen-Griep et al., 2006; McCroskey, 1977; Voelkl, 1995; Weast, 1996). Given this established relationship between participation and learning, the distribution of turns at talk is central to the issue of equity in education.

Whereas social constructivism focuses on *how* learning takes place, critical pedagogy is about *what* is taught/learned (see, e.g., Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2008; Giroux, 2011). It focuses, in particular, on the role of formal education in reproducing the existing social order. This includes how certain voices and narratives are elevated while others are silenced, how hegemonic discourses are naturalized, and how different types of knowledge and different worldviews are ultimately validated or invalidated (see, e.g., Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Stuart-Faris, 2004; Carter, 2001, 2007; McLaren, 1991).

Defining 'equity'

The belief that education should be fair and equitable for all students is longstanding and has been the basis of countless studies of educational inequity, its causes, and possible solutions (see, e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2010; Secada, 1989; Secada, Fennema, & Byrd Adajian, 1995). The concept of equity has proven problematic, however, as the term has been used to refer to widely different notions, often only implicitly (see Fennema, 1990). This section discusses three main definitions of equity in education.

One widely held view, which is also the legal standard for equity, is that equity means *equity of opportunity* (Fennema, 1990). In educational settings, this means that students are not (as a matter of protocol, at least) segregated on the basis of characteristics such as race/ethnicity or gender, but rather do their learning collectively in the same classrooms, ostensibly enjoying the same rights and subject to the same rules.

Another notion of equity, which sets the bar somewhat higher, is what will be referred to as *equity of experience*. Under this view, equity in education means that different students not only share the same classroom and are subject to the same rules, but have the same educational experiences, including being treated the same by their teachers. Studies have shown that, in practice, different students often have very different educational experiences within the same classroom (see, e.g., Fennema & Peterson, 1987; Grieb & Easley, 1984). Crucially, from a social-constructivist view of learning, equity of experience includes students' participating in a similar number of qualitatively comparable classroom interactions.

The third and most rigorous notion of equity in education is what will be referred to as *equity of outcomes*. As the term suggests, this characterizes a state of affairs in which there are no differences in the educational attainment of different groups (though the inevitability of individual differences is generally still accepted; Fennema, 1990). The stubborn persistence of achievement gaps, not to mention the perennial discussion of their causes and possible solutions, underscores just how far we still are from achieving this ultimate form of equity (see, e.g., Burchinal et al., 2011; Timar & Maxwell-Jolly, 2012).

Clearly, the above definitions of equity ignore the fact that classroom discourse tends to privilege the ideas and experiences of sociohistorically dominant groups, thus reproducing their power by naturalizing their discourses and narratives (see, e.g., Bloome et al., 2004, pp. 163–164). As a result of this, despite being granted certain types of access, students of non-dominant groups are marginalized by the naturalization of dominant discourses, their views silenced, and their experiences and potential contributions invalidated (see, e.g., Carter, 2001, 2007). These issues of power and hegemony as obstacles to *true* equity will be tackled in Section 'Two with one stone: Recitation scripts, invitations to bid, and the nature of knowledge'. Until then, the above definitions will suffice for the purpose of highlighting the relevant differences among the various floor-allocation strategies.

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