Review

Researching language and communication in schooling

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ABSTRACT

As many societies, in the Global North as well as the South, become increasingly diverse ethnically and linguistically, the language of schooling is a subject of considerable public and academic interest, particularly in contexts where students are learning the medium of instruction. In this 'response' I will engage with the first three articles in this Issue from the point of view of an educational linguist with an interest in ethnographic research. I am particularly concerned with two issues: the conceptualisation and characterisation of academic language with reference to classroom spoken communication, and the dynamic and interactional nature of classroom pedagogy in relation to the notion of academic language. I will draw on empirical classroom studies from different phases of education to illustrate my arguments.

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1. Introduction

The role played by language in learning is a subject of considerable public and academic attention. As many societies, in the Global North as well as the South, become increasingly diverse ethnically and linguistically, there is a need to continually study the ways in which language is used as a medium of classroom and school communication, particularly in contexts where students are from minority communities who are in the process of learning the school language. London, with over 50% of its secondary school population coming from ethnolinguistic minority communities (Hamnet, 2011), is an example of this kind of location where the twin issues related to the learning of the school language (as an additional/second language) and using language to learn at the same time loom large in everyday classroom activities. For this reason I welcome this special issue on Academic Language. In this discussion I will engage with the other three articles from the point of view of an educational linguist with an interest in ethnographic research. I will explore some of the conceptual and pedagogic issues arising out of the arguments and propositions presented. I am particularly concerned with two issues: the

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conceptualisation and characterisation of academic language with reference to classroom spoken communication, and the dynamic and interactional nature of classroom pedagogy in relation to the notion of academic language.

2. Academic language in the classroom

In language-focussed research in the field of additional/second language learning regarding students from language minority communities, one of the main themes has been concerned with distinguishing between the language associated with everyday social purposes and the language used for teaching and learning in the school curriculum. The basic assumption is that academic activities are associated with a kind of language that is different from that used in everyday activities. Based on this assumption, the work of Cummins (1984, 1992, 2000) among others has strongly influenced both research and pedagogy in this field. Another approach that has made substantial impact is grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). These two approaches will be discussed in turn.

2.1. BICS vs. CALP

Cummins' (1984) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) has been very influential in shaping both research and pedagogic discussions. BICS is associated with communication in contexts where meaning is more or less familiar, where the immediate situation provides a range of cues for meaning and where familiar forms of language are used (e.g. greetings in the morning). CALP, on the other hand, is characterised as communication in which non-routine meaning is expressed mainly through language, and the forms of language involved are not necessarily familiar (e.g. an academic lecture). CALP is also characterised as being incrementally challenging as students progress through the school years: 'As students progress through the grades, they encounter far more low frequency words (primarily from Greek and Latin sources), complex syntax (e.g. passive), and abstract expressions that are virtually never heard in everyday conversation' (Cummins and Man, 2007, p. 801). Furthermore, it is argued that CALP is strongly associated with academic progress: 'CALP . . . develops through social interaction from birth but becomes differentiated from BICS after the early stages of schooling to reflect primarily the language that children acquire in school and [that] they need to use effectively if they are to progress successfully through the grades' (Cummins, 2008, p. 72). The implication for teaching is that students should be assisted to move from BICS to CALP progressively.

As Haneda (in this issue) observes, the BICS–CALP distinction has been critiqued over the years on a number of grounds, including the way in which it has been formulated, which is potentially open to the interpretation that language development moves in a linear direction from BICS (easy/easier to learn) to CALP (challenging to learn). Nevertheless, the BICS–CALP distinction has engaged the attention of researchers and educators alike because it captures a complex phenomenon and renders it in clear analytic and descriptive terms. In other words, the kind of language used for academic purposes can be described and typified in particular ways. This can be construed as a knowledge base. Pedagogically, having a knowledge base makes teaching (more) imaginable, if nothing else.

There is little doubt that the language found in published teaching materials (e.g. print-based textbooks and web-based teaching–learning resources), for instance, tends to be highly structured in organisation, specialist in register and new/unfamiliar in meaning. These are some of the characteristics of written academic language that we have known for some time. However, given the interactionally dynamic nature of classroom talk and communication (e.g. interrupted turns, requests for clarification, topic shifts and so on), and the discourse variations in style associated with different kinds of classroom activities (e.g. teacher-fronted talk on subject content, teacher–student bantering, etc.), spoken language in the classroom does not generally resemble formal written text except in moments given over to monologic presentations (e.g. teacher lecturing and student reporting). So, how far does the BICS–CALP distinction correspond to actual classroom language use? Is teaching largely expressed through formal subject-specific language, i.e. CALP? Is everyday language easy/easier to understand and use? These questions are connected to Haneda's (in this issue) call to widen the perspective on academic language in terms of 'academic communication'. Furthermore, Haneda suggests that while the ability to use academic language is undoubtedly an important contributing factor for academic success, the focus in much of the professional and research discussion of academic language to date has largely been on content-linked written registers, often at the expense of other equally important facets of school and classroom communication.

Gibbons (2009) has shown that in actual classroom activities, everyday informal language and subject-related academic language form the end points of a continuum. Teachers and students may 'mesh' (Gibbon's term) everyday and academic language to suit their communicative purposes. For example, a teacher may say 'Like that' when demonstrating attraction and repulsion with realia, and when providing an overview moments later '. . .so when they were facing one way, you felt the magnets attract and stick together. When you turned one of the magnets around you felt it *repelling*, or pushing away . . .' (Gibbons, 2009, p. 61, original italics). On this view there is a need to expand the notion of academic language in the classroom context to take account of the differences between written language in formal texts and contingent interactionally minded spoken language in classroom. If we accept that academic communication includes all the interactional exchanges between teachers and students in the classroom, then it clearly encompasses a much wider range of language registers and styles than the bookish formal content-linked written variety.

As to the question of whether everyday informal language is easy/easier to understand and use, it would seem that routine social communication expressed through informal everyday language, such as greetings in the morning, is relatively easy to