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Knowledge and school talk: Intellectual accommodations to literacy?

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the goals of the research project on which this special issue of *Linguistics and Education* is based. A case is made for considering contemporary education as saturated by and dependent on oral and written language, and on beliefs and practices that relate knowledge, talk, reading and writing. The project is directed at a better understanding of the relationship between oral and written language, and, through collaborations between researchers and teachers, at improving practices that encourage learning. This paper frames the special issue by pointing to a crucial but largely unremarked misalignment – between teaching and learning via classroom interaction and assessment via individual written performance – that lies at the center of current educational practice. A recognition of that misalignment and its significance for students together call for a theoretical and empirical re-engagement with the relationship between literacy education and knowledge on the part of educational practitioners and researchers.

> The problem of literacy is thus partly one of technical skill and the popular acquaintance with what can be done with an alphabet. It is also one of education and includes a commitment of traditions to writing . . . Literacy in any society is not just a matter of who could read and write, but one of how their skills function, and of the adjustments – mental, emotional, intellectual, physical, and technological – necessary to accommodate it. (McKitterick, 1990: 4)

1. Introduction

Linguists, and language-focused scholars of any kind, should be intrigued by how teaching and learning happen in schools. Goodwin and Heritage made the point that, in general, 'social interaction is the primordial means through which the business of the social world is transacted' (1990: 283), but where outside a classroom is this business so completely pervaded by, managed through, and evaluated via oral and written language? The resources by which schooling is even just brought off, let alone successfully, are unrelievedly language resources, to the point where institutionalized education can be seen as a legally mandated, thirteen-thousand-hour language program.

The language of schools is not just talk. In most cultural and intellectual traditions the various benefits of literate forms of representation over oral communication have been recognized and gradually expanded and capitalized on for a long time (Fischer, 2001). Developments in the uses of literacy have shown substantial variations in rate and from place to place, but it has been the case that, over the last five thousand years or so, some form of regulated tutelage ('schooling') has increasingly become the pre-eminent approach to disseminating the ability to read and write (Fischer, 2001; Limage, 2005). The slow, uneven, but steady co-development of literacy and schooling, and of their co-dependency (Robb, 1994), comprise perhaps the stand-out accommodation of human communication to literacy in the contemporary condition.

It has been relatively recently, however, that being able to read and produce complex written texts has been institutionally enshrined as both a universal benefit and a universal requirement (Freebody, Barton, & Chan, 2013). As the magnitude and

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complexity of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes entrusted to schooling increased, the role of literate forms of language became more prominent, providing more of the sources of educational materials and the bases for evaluating both the efficacy of schooling in general and the performance of individual students. However, schools remained nonetheless sites immersed in talk. So, working in, researching, and theorizing the relations between oral and literate forms of communication is of particular significance to educators and to those with a stake in educational practices (i.e., everyone else).

It is understandable, then, that linguists began to study the sites of education some decades ago. One of their first conclusions about language in classrooms was that two kinds of interaction are found. Generally these are distinguished as 'managerial' versus 'instructional' (or, in the formulation of Bernstein, 'regulative discourse' and 'instructional discourse'; 2000). The papers in this issue are drawn from a project that began by focusing on the latter – talk aimed at the formal curriculum – but has not ended there. It has been led into examining the ways in which literacy, talk, and the structuring of knowledge can be productively related by teachers and researchers.

The goals of our project included inquiring into how literacy is put to work in interactions in classrooms in the apparent service of instruction in formal curriculum knowledge. The project was partly motivated by the comparative scarcity of theoretical and empirical attention given to those variations that characterize language and literacy use across different disciplinary or curriculum domains. So in that regard our goals included re-theorizing the curriculum-specific uses of literacy. Our intentions were also overtly normative: in collaboration with teachers we undertook an inquiry aimed at exploring the role of written texts in developing more cumulative, integrated, discipline-informed educational practice in classrooms, and informing more systematic attention to these matters in the preparation of teachers and in research on teaching and literacy.

2. Talk and writing in and for school

Assessment via a solo literate performance, having learned in group interactions, presents the key anomaly of contemporary education, everywhere visible, yet hardly ever noticed. This contrast between the conditions of work-up in classrooms versus high-stakes performance in formal assessments points to a logic that is central to how students face the 'work' of schooling, every day and over the long term. At the same time this logic remains largely unremarked by researchers, theoreticians, and teacher educators. The arguments variously developed in the papers in this special issue serve to make and illustrate the further point that this anomaly is not a quirk of outmoded assessment policies, or of the logistics imposed by administrating standardized tests involving large numbers of students. Rather, it is a reflection of an organizational settlement of the contradiction presented by mass schooling on the one hand, and, on the other, the recognition that the powerful forms of thought and reasoning arising from extended exposure to coherent curriculum programs, and that speak most directly to civic and work participation in contemporary settings, are available only through the written word and other forms of inscribed representation. History, physics, biology, mathematics, and all the rest, as we know them and act them out, are possible only through the technologies of literacy. Regardless of how reliant on oral interactions our current mass apprenticeship into these knowledge domains may be, curriculums do not live in, or rest on, oral traditions of thought, expression, or use.

We have observed throughout our project that the talk circling around the knowledge proffered in classrooms is usually focused on, or at least accompanied by, textual materials imported into classrooms – books, handouts, slideshows, posters, websites, the pre-planned instructional writing of the teacher, and all the rest. Much of the interaction we found in Year 11 classrooms is around present or imminent texts, in the presence of a text, or in the shadows, as it were, of a forthcoming written task.

We find from the corpus collected for this project that, while the conventionalized patterns of inscribed language and image are the resource on which schooling is based, they rarely form the topic of explicit instruction beyond the first few years of schooling. What that means is that the distinctive ways in which each curriculum domain puts literacy to work are not generally presented as problems for pedagogy. In a sense, then, the centerpiece of schooling – knowledge as it is formally represented in these resources – is often the 'missing what', both as a topic of educational theory and research, and as a generative problematic in the preparation of teachers (Freebody, Maton, & Martin, 2008; Hester & Francis, 2007). We argue further, as documented elsewhere (Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Freiberg & Freebody, 1995; Teese & Polesel, 2003), that this 'missing what' has disadvantaging effects that are not randomly distributed across the full range of socio-demographic settings that school systems are charged with serving.

So we have discovered that one aspect of contemporary education that should fascinate linguists, along with the omnipresence and omni-relevance of language in classrooms, is the anomaly, all the more disturbing because it seems unremarked, at the heart of educational practice. Namely, for the most part, students are *not* assessed primarily on how well they can engage in the activity that thoroughly pervades their daily school life – oral responses demonstrating access to, understanding of, and appropriate reactions to texts – but rather on how closely their writing can approximate the forms of those texts, especially the ways in which those texts display particular organizational features that in turn reflect domain-specific forms of thought (Christie & Derewianka, 2008). Teachers routinely and continually model and monitor students' reading and their talking about what they read; but, when it matters, teachers, and educational systems at large, assess students' work against a benchmark of how well each knowledge domain's 'accommodation' to literacy has come to be represented as knowledge.

While we have observed glimpses of instructional engagement with students' writing, and maybe the occasional lesson built around directly improving their writing, in general, we find that these have as their topical focus the logistics of students'