

The messiness of language socialization in reading groups: Participation in and resistance to the values of essayist literacy

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the process of literacy socialization in several 5th grade reading groups. Through close analysis of spoken interaction, which centers on a heavily illustrated, non-fiction text, the paper proposes that these reading groups can be seen as complex sites of socialization to the values associated with essayist literacy (i.e., the type of written language often associated with school literacy and characterized by an impersonal, “de-contextualized” presentation of factual information). Through a qualitative focus on the interaction of novice, expert, and text, children in the data are shown to participate in spoken displays that highlight the impersonal, factual content of the written text. These displays of the sort of language associated with essayist literacy are achieved primarily through read-aloud episodes and follow-up question–answer sequences in which the teacher and student co-construct text-based propositions.

However, a competing perspective emerges when interaction focuses on the illustrations. In such sequences, the children seem eager to engage in a more contextualized and personal use of language. In the illustration-oriented interaction, they not only employ more explicitly context-dependent linguistic forms; they also produce more full clauses, engage in more interaction outside of traditional tripartite (IRE) classroom interaction, and display higher levels of affective engagement. This interaction is also marked by a complex interplay of contextualized and decontextualized language, sometimes within the same utterance or turn, pointing to a multifaceted relationship between the two. The paper proposes that although the values associated with essayist literacy are dominant, the participants’ apparent interactional resistance to these values points to a complex socialization context of competing underlying orientations. It also argues for the need to clarify and reconsider the widespread emphasis on decontextualization in instructional contexts.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Essayist literacy and “decontextualization”

The kind of literacy valued in much U.S.-based school experience has been termed ‘essayist’ by a broad range of scholars (e.g., Farr, 1993; Farr & Nardini, 1996; Gee, 1996; Patthey-Chavez & Gergen, 1992; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Trimbur, 1990). Essayist literacy has been widely depicted as decontextualized in the sense that it stands apart from its context of production and in theory “supplies the contexts necessary for interpretation within the text itself” (Trimbur,

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1990, p. 73). The author in essayist literacy is said to render him- or herself invisible or “self-effaced” (Scollon & Scollon, 1981), as the text becomes a self-sufficient bearer of unadorned facts or information written in an impersonal voice (Farr, 1993). Such texts are seemingly independent representations that yield a reality constituted of facts and fact-like status and as such, attain a kind of unquestioned authoritative status (Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Trimbur, 1990).

The emphasis in many educational settings on the production and comprehension of decontextualized texts attests to the underlying influence of an essayist literacy orientation. The differences between contextualized and decontextualized language have, for example, been linked to ‘playground’ and classroom or academic language, respectively (e.g., Cummins, 1984; Gibbons, 1991; cf., Michaels, 1981). In Cummins’ well-known paradigm (1984, 1991), this distinction is represented as BICS or “basic interpersonal communication skills” and contrasted with CALP or “cognitive academic language proficiency”.¹ Context-embedded language, associated with BICS, is based in the here and now, tends to be more informal, and occurs most often in contexts of face-to-face or casual spoken interaction. In contrast, the context-reduced language of CALP, typically associated with writing, must be understood largely free of its immediate physical or visual context. CALP is also said to be more cognitively demanding because of its apparent separation from a context which might support textual meaning and thus enhance comprehension (e.g., O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Snow & Brinton, 1997).

These distinctions cohere with work in discourse analysis that has similarly linked the differences between contextualized and decontextualized language to speech and writing, (e.g., Chafe, 1982; Chafe and Danielewicz, 1987). Tannen (1982), for example, noted early on the recurrent theme in research on speech and writing that “spoken discourse is highly contextualized, while writing is decontextualized” (cf., Kay, 1977; Olson, 1977) (p. 3). In Chafe’s (1982) original and widely used terms, writing was described as more “detached” and speaking more “involved”, terms that largely parallel the decontextualized/contextualized distinction made by others.² Later he characterized writing as “desituated” in that “the environment and circumstances of its production and reception” have “minimal influence on the language. . . itself” (Chafe, 1994, p. 45). As a consequence of these similar depictions of written language from both educational and discourse analytic perspectives, a large body of pedagogical literature, teacher-training materials and even state standards now focuses on the need for children to develop competence in reading and writing the sort of decontextualized language said to be associated with academic literacy.

Even as these views persist, however, many scholars have taken issue with the widespread characterization of school-based literacy as decontextualized (e.g., Bartolomé & Macedo, 1999; Gee, 1990; Lea & Street, 1998). In fact, given the focus over the past three decades on contexts of literacy, it is somewhat surprising that the decontextualized paradigm has remained so prominent. As is well known, the seminal work of Heath (1982), Scribner and Cole (1981), and Street (1984) prompted a flourishing body of research focused on contextualized or situated uses of literacy (e.g., Bloome, 1987; Green & Meyer, 1991; McLaughlin, 1989; Shether, 1993; Vasquez, 1992; Zinsser, 1986). Across a wide variety of cultural and institutional settings, this work, now often termed the New Literacy Studies (see, e.g., Gee, 1996; Prinsloo and Breier, 1996), seeks to understand the social functions of written language through observation and analysis of its situated use in context. Moreover, as implied by such a focus, but in contradiction to the view of school-based literacy as decontextualized, situated literacy research assumes that all written language is contextualized in complex and multi-layered ways.

The situation is complicated further by the fact that some scholars who have claimed or assumed decontextualization to be a feature of the kind of written language valued in schools have themselves investigated contexts of literacy (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 1986; Michaels, 1981; Scollon & Scollon, 1981). This suggests that a problem lies with the definitional scope of ‘(de)contextualization’, which is seldom explicitly delineated. Specifically, the notions of decontextualization or contextualization as applied to written language typically imply a limited scope of meaning, namely, whether or not a text is linked through linguistic or gestural means to its immediate context or to its author, audience or context of production (cf., Bartolomé & Macedo, 1999). Hence, a so-called ‘decontextualized’ text is said to be

¹ These in turn can be related to Bernstein’s notions of restricted and elaborated code (1972), which parallel the BICS and CALP notions, respectively.

² In discourse analytic work on the speech–writing interface, the distinction between involvement and detachment has been modified through extensive work focused on clarifying how these characteristics relate to social context and register variation (Biber, 1986, 1988; Csomay, 2004). Nevertheless, the involvement/detachment distinction has been assumed and furthered by numerous scholars, even in the context of Chafe’s having adopted new terminology (situated/desituated).

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