

“Going up there”: Challenges and opportunities for language minority students during a mainstream classroom speech event

George C. Bunch*

Education Department, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1156 High Street, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, United States

Abstract

This article explores challenges and opportunities for language minority students and their monolingual English-speaking classmates during oral presentations in mainstream 7th grade social studies classrooms. The classrooms were designed to provide access to rigorous content and opportunities to develop English for use in academic settings. Student groups simultaneously used presentational language and managed interpersonal interaction with several distinct audiences, manifested through participant structures that required them to sustain extended discourse and respond to interjections from the teacher. Delivering presentations as a group provided students with supports and additional challenges. Viewing oral presentations as *speech events* provides a productive lens for (a) highlighting academic language challenges that go beyond vocabulary and grammar, (b) recognizing the opportunities for language development inherent in those challenges, and (c) envisioning supports to assist with the challenges without eliminating the opportunities.

© 2009 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Language minority students; English learners; English language learners; Academic language; Middle schools; Language demands; Speech events; Presentations; Mainstream instruction; Secondary education; Sheltered instruction; Cooperative learning

1. Introduction

In order to inform discussions surrounding effective preparation of language minority students for academic success in English-medium classrooms, a better understanding is needed of the language demands of mainstream academic instruction and the potential of instructional alternatives that provide both support for language learners and access to academic content and language. In this article, I explore language used in mainstream 7th grade social studies classrooms designed to provide support for language minority students without sacrificing either a rigorous curriculum or access to native-English-speaking peers. To understand some of the challenges and opportunities in these classrooms, I focus on one speech event that students and teachers called “going up there”: group oral presentations delivered in the front of the classroom. Even within these single, “bounded” classroom presentation events, students were called upon to address multiple audiences, often simultaneously, and to engage in different interaction patterns with other students and the teacher. Students negotiated these demands as small groups rather than individuals, leading to unique challenges and opportunities. Exploring the nature of the interactions in these speech events shines light on language demands embedded in mainstream settings as well as opportunities for students to expand their communicative and interactional repertoires.

* Tel.: +1 831 459 1828; fax: +1 831 459 4618.

E-mail address: gbunch@ucsc.edu.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Academic language and speech events

Educators and scholars have been interested for some time in what makes the language of schooling so difficult, especially for students who have achieved some amount of proficiency in English yet continue to struggle in English-medium instructional settings. Yet conceptions of “academic language” have varied widely (Bunch, 2006, *in press*; Cummins, 2000; Rivera, 1984; Rolstad, *in press*; Valdés, 2004). Some scholars emphasize its contrast with language used in other, everyday settings presumably more familiar to students, defining academic language as “language that stands in contrast to everyday informal speech that students use outside the classroom environment” (Bailey & Butler, 2003, p. 3). Cummins (1984, 2000) has focused on the “cognitive demands” and “decontextualized” nature of academic language, contrasted with the “basic interpersonal communication skills” of conversational language. Cummins’ framework, while influential, has been critiqued for conflating language proficiency with school-based literacy skills and for ignoring the fact that all language is contextualized in one way or another (see Bartolomé, 1998; Bunch, 2006, *in press*; Cummins, 2000; MacSwan and Rolstad, 2003; Rivera, 1984).

Other approaches focus on academic language not in binary contrast with “everyday” language, but rather as linguistic and functional resources used in classrooms: language needed “to acquire a new or deeper understanding of content related to the core curriculum areas and communicate that understanding to others” (TESOL, 2006, p. 18). To understand the nature of this language, scholars have focused on the grammatical and lexical features of oral and written texts in academic settings (e.g. Bailey, 2007; Christie, 2000; Coffin, 2006; Halliday & Martin, 1993; Martin, 2002; Schleppegrell, 2004) as well as language functions commonly required in the classroom (Bailey, 2007; Chamot & O’Malley, 1987, 1994; TESOL, 1997).

An even more comprehensive view of the language demands of classroom settings requires investigation of the speech events through which academic language is used, including how students are called upon to address different audiences and participate in different interactional structures. Ethnographic and sociocultural approaches highlight the wide range of communicative events and genres that students encounter in classroom settings (e.g. Adger, 2004; Cazden, 1986; Gutiérrez, 1995; Hawkins, 2004; Rockwell, 2000). It is not only language minority students’ ability to control discrete features of English that is important, but also the ways in which they engage in classroom participation structures and routines, some of which involve cultural gaps between home discourse practices and those required in school (Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1981; Philips, 1983). Successful classroom participation requires *interactional* as well as linguistic competence (Mehan, 1979, p. 127). While conceptual distinctions between speech events and genres vary (see Ferguson, 1994; Johns, 2002; Preston, 1989, pp. 140–145; Schiffrin, 1994; Swales, 1990), I use *speech events* to describe the overall interactional demands of “bounded” classroom events and episodes such as teacher-fronted lessons, groupwork sessions, and oral presentations. These events comprise the broader speech situation of classroom communication.¹ In turn, speech events could be analyzed separately for the variety of *genres*, such as narrative and description, employed within them (Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 83).

2.2. Oral presentations in academic settings

Oral presentations are common in academic settings from elementary school through higher education. For language minority students, especially when working in groups, preparing for and delivering oral presentations provide opportunities for planned, “pushed” and “comprehensible output” potentially helpful for second language acquisition (Swain, 2005; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Presentations also present a number of potential linguistic, social and interactional challenges. They are anxiety-producing (Haig & Oliver, 2003; Oliver, Haig, & Rochecouste, 2005); defined by culturally specific expectations (Cazden, 2001; Michaels, 1981; Morita, 2000; Philips, 1983); and include organizational and delivery demands (Meloni & Thompson, 1980). Furthermore, they involve using language in the *presentational mode*, requiring “the creation of messages in a manner that facilitates interpretation by [others]” with “no direct opportunity

¹ Hymes (1972a) describes speech *situations* as activities in any speech community that are “in some way bounded or integral” but which may not in themselves be governed by only one set of rules for speaking (p. 56). Speech *events*, in turn, are “activities, or aspects of activities, that are directly governed by rules or norms for the use of speech” (p. 56).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/366328>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/366328>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)