



## Talking about texts: Middle school students' engagement in metalinguistic talk

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, discourse analytical methods are applied to data from two middle school classrooms, as a teacher, researcher, and students' engage in research based curricula (Martínez, Orellana, Pacheco, & Carbone, 2008; Orellana & Reynolds, 2008) designed to leverage students' language brokering skills and facilitate discussion about languages. Analysis centers on teacher and researcher mediated talk that engages students in exploring their linguistic skills through an examination of voice and register in multiple settings. This paper argues that engaging in talk about how language meets our social needs can provide an authentic and valuable way for teachers and students to recognize what they can do and do bring to the classroom. This type of talk can also help to cultivate students' metalinguistic awareness and promote students' discursive consciousness.

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*Classroom teaching and curriculum must engage with students' own experience and discourses, which are increasingly defined by cultural and sub cultural diversity and the different language backgrounds and practices that come with this diversity (New London Group, 1996).*

### 1. Introduction

Research over the last two decades has revealed the rich sociocultural lives students lead in and out of school settings, and the dynamic literacy practices that accompany them (Alim, 2004; Gee, 2004; Heath, 1983; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008; Orellana, 2001, 2009; Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, & Meza, 2003; Zentella, 2005). Schools, however, have failed to embrace this new knowledge in meaningful ways. While research continues to highlight students' repertoires of practice it also increasingly underscores how students' own learning and literacy experiences are not often reflected in the school practices in which they engage (Gee, 2004; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Asato, 2001; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Luke, 2005; Moje et al., 2004; Orellana & Reynolds, 2008; Street, 2003). This is supported by much of the work that has detailed what counts as literacy and what literacy practices are valued across a range of disciplines and contexts (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Collins & Blot, 2003; Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000; Heath, 1983; Street, 1993; Unsworth, 2006).

Unfortunately, it also happens that some educators consider the language and literacy skills and experiences of many students from nondominant backgrounds as being linguistically deficient (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). In the United States, and in many other nations, these students are often subjected to reductive remedial literacy programs that do not recognize the repertoires of practice (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) that they bring to their language and learning. Luke (2004) suggests literacy policy and practice have not responded to the realities of new and culturally diverse student populations—students

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who are able to use multiple languages and traverse multiple registers. Despite the centrality of literacy-based practices in school, few opportunities are created in classrooms to explicitly address how language meets our social needs, and few opportunities exist to explore students' linguistic repertoires.

This paper details how two urban middle school classrooms engage in talk about language. Analysis centers on teacher and researcher mediated talk that engages students in exploring their linguistic skills through an examination of voice and register in multiple settings. This paper argues that student and teacher talk that interrogates how language is used to meet our social needs may be a valuable way to help teachers and students to both recognize and build on their linguistic strengths. Analysis also suggests that this may facilitate preliminary development of students' metalinguistic awareness and activate emerging discursive consciousness.

## 2. Theoretical framework and corresponding literature

As our classrooms increasingly become more culturally and linguistically diverse we are continually concerned with finding ways that help students make meaning while being active, critical thinkers. Studies of literacy in classrooms and communities makes clear that speech and literacy are active social practices that occur in the contexts of diverse everyday situations (Luke & Kale, 1997). In order to increasingly support students' on-going language and literacy development and enrich the learning for all, we need to find ways to build on our students' rich cultural and linguistic resources. Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) influential sociocultural theory of learning suggests that learning is an essentially collaborative activity that occurs within a particular social setting. Vygotsky further suggests that external dialogue is a major resource for the development of thinking and ongoing scholarship has continued to show how interaction is integral to language teaching and learning (Swain, 2000; Wells, 1999). By situating literacy in social and cultural practice (Freire, 2000; Gee, 1990; Street, 1984), sociocultural theory provides a framework for how literacy is learned. Learning is best facilitated within communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) where the individual learner and the community of practice work together to co-construct knowledge.

Considering these notions, it follows then that we must consider ways to engage in substantive talk about language in classrooms. Cummins (2000) suggests that how teachers talk about and with their students is determined by how they construct their students as learners. In this study we see students as active participants, whose contributions and knowledge are used as resources for building new shared knowledge; language use is not serving as a response to an activity or event, but rather, as an actual social activity and event that engages students in calling on their own everyday practices and experiences.

### 2.1. A sociocultural approach to language learning

This study is further informed by sociocultural perspectives that view everyday language practices as valuable cultural resources and funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) that can be built on in school. Recent ethnographic research has continued to debunk deficit notions about nondominant students' language and literacy practices and instead has continued to demonstrate the complexity embedded in everyday language practices (Alim, 2004; Goodwin, 1990; Heath, 1983; Martínez, 2010; Orellana, 2009). This recent research considers a wide range of practices and experiences across a number of contexts.

Orellana's work (2001, 2009; Orellana et al., 2003) done in immigrant communities in LA and Chicago, for example, detailed students' translation experiences over a wide range of purposes, audiences, and contexts, and found that students often possess sophisticated translation skills (Orellana et al., 2003). This and other research (McQuillan & Tse, 1995) reveals immigrant students brokering language with regularity. Other researchers have studied dynamic hybrid language such as African American Vernacular English (Alim, 2005; Alim & Baugh, 2007; Labov, 1972; Smitherman, 1986), and this work continues to reveal the complex linguistic and sociocultural processes inherent in this language practice. Others have engaged in comprehensive studies of Spanish English code-switching (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 2003; Martínez, 2010; Zentella, 2005). While historically there has been some disagreement about the factors that constrain code-switching, current consensus across multidisciplinary research is that bilingual speakers code-switch for various communicative purposes. Research has also continued to provide evidence that this practice is not a result of insufficient competence in two languages, but a rich and valuable linguistic resource that bilingual speakers use with regularity (Blom & Gumperz, 1972; MacSwan, 1999; Milroy & Muysken, 1995; Zentella, 2005).

Correspondingly, an ongoing substantial body of scholarship has continued to frame this cultural and linguistic diversity as a resource for teaching and learning. This research has focused on how to use students' cultural, linguistic, and intellectual resources to enhance their academic potential. Sociocultural researchers have presented new approaches and provided new ways of thinking about and extending students' linguistic repertoires and using students' everyday practices as pedagogical resources (Gutiérrez, Morales, & Martínez, 2009).

### 2.2. Leveraging students' practices, skills and experiences

Increasingly a number of these scholars have produced work that promotes curriculum changes (Alim & Baugh, 2007; Carbone & Orellana, 2010; Gutiérrez et al., 1997; Lee, 2007; Martínez, 2010; Orellana & Reynolds, 2008) prompting educators to continue to look for ways to create classroom communities that authenticate, integrate, and connect classroom literacy

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