A linguistic description of popular education: The enactment of pedagogy in the classroom

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The paper explores a practice of popular education in Chile, in order to provide a linguistically based description of its pedagogy based on two key pedagogic dimensions: knowledge and interaction. The study is informed by Systemic Functional Linguistics and explores ideational and interpersonal meanings realised in resources from the discourse-semantic stratum, which are understood to construe knowledge and enact social relations through language. Discursive analysis shows continuity and discontinuity in meaning patterns in classroom discourse. Prevalent ideational and interpersonal patterns show an orientation towards the construal of specialised knowledge and the enactment of hierarchical relations between participants. However, instances of discontinuity in discourse show that a more horizontal relation can be enacted when a different patterning of ideational and interpersonal meanings occurs. The paper argues that the pedagogy of popular education, deemed by the literature as 'democratic', becomes so by transmitting to its students knowledge that would be otherwise inaccessible while at the same time opening up the space for instances of more egalitarian interaction in the classroom.

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1. Introduction

Popular education has been historically an important alternative for the education of disadvantaged groups in Latin America and other parts of the world. While its peak of activity and notability occurred in the continent during the 70s and 80s, it is still today carried out by an important number of organisations in search of their own education. Popular education has adapted to the new social, political and cultural scenarios of its time, emerging as a vast and complex domain of educative practices (Vales, 2014).

Despite the heterogeneity of the field, popular education can be characterised by three main principles. First, its core aims are to address the educative needs of marginalised and/or minority groups within society and encourage participants to create and organise their own education (Crowther, 1999; Kane, 2001). Second, popular education practices manifest an explicit political commitment in the transformation of the material, historical and social conditions reproducing social inequalities and maintaining disadvantaged classes in a position of domination (Crowther, 1999; Martin, 1999; Rodrigues Brandão, 2006; Torres Carrillo, 2012). Third, popular education is said to propose an alternative pedagogic project that conceives students as subjects (as opposed to objects) and teachers as facilitators (Freire, 1970; Kane, 2001). This pedagogic project aims to disarticulate the hierarchical positioning of teachers and students in the classroom and create an egalitarian relationship, which would contribute to enhancing the learning process for students.

Of all the dimensions referred, the pedagogic project of popular education is the aspect that has received less attention in research on this field in the Latin American context. Most of the literature in relation to the pedagogy of popular education has been devoted to the description and compilation of teaching techniques (Consejo de Educación de Adultos de América Latina, 2008; Silva Uribe, 1981; Vargas & Bustillos, 1989). Another important body of literature has concentrated on theoretical descriptions foregrounding the 'democratic' nature of the construal of knowledge and the classroom interaction of popular education (e.g. Aldana Mendoza & Núñez, 2002; Choy Ajquejay & Cristales, 2010; Colectivo Paulo Freire, 2013; Kane, 2001). However, there is very limited empirical research that looks systematically at specific practices of popular education in order to describe how its 'democratic pedagogy' is or should be realised in practice.

The limited empirical research on pedagogic issues has been long acknowledged as a key limitation in the field. As Cendales and Posada (1993) argue, "looking at the history of what popular education has been in the last decades and in the contexts where it has existed, we have to admit that a reflection from the pedagogy of

the popular educative practice has been absent" (p. 22). Key aspects considered relevant for the pedagogic description of popular education are the process of transmission of knowledge and the learning that occurs on the part of participants of popular education (Van Dam, Martinic, & Peter, 1992, p. 11).

This paper aims to address to some extent the lack of pedagogic research on popular education by exploring some of the pedagogic principles that rule classroom practices and become enacted through language. The study focuses on two key interrelated pedagogic dimensions: the **knowledge** being construed in the classroom and the **relation** established between teacher and student in the process of construing knowledge. The paper examines a particular instance of classroom discourse of popular education in Santiago, Chile. This exploration is carried out from a discursive perspective grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Hood, 2010; Martin, 1992, 1993; Martin & Rose, 2007). While recent research from the SFL perspective has proposed a metafuncional approach to the study of knowledge construal in discourse, considering at the same time ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions (e.g. Martin, 2015; Martin & Matruglio, 2013), this paper focuses particularly on the first two. Nevertheless, the theoretical choice informing the present research allows for a more integrated study of the pedagogic dimensions of knowledge and interaction in popular education, through the exploration of particular meaning resources in the discourse-semantics stratum from the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions in SFL.

2. Theoretical and methodological approach

2.1. Understanding teaching practice as classroom discourse in context

The basic premise sustaining the exploration of the pedagogy of popular education is that the teaching/learning that occurs in the classroom is made possibly primarily through language. The practices explored here are therefore understood in terms of **classroom discourse**. Classroom discourse is described from the SFL perspective as a social practice that unfolds through negotiation of meaning (cf. Christie, 2002; Rose & Martin, 2012). Classroom discourse is thus a particular type of discourse that enacts roles and construes meaning as part of the social activity of teaching/learning of knowledge. The kinds of meanings construed and the roles negotiated are specific to this social practice.

The social activity of teaching and learning can also be understood within the SFL framework from the perspective of **register** (Martin, 1992). In other words, it can be looked at not only in terms of the kind of discourse construed (i.e. classroom discourse) but also – and complementarily – in terms of the context of situation in which this particular form of discourse is construed. This integrated perspective into pedagogic practices – as a particular contextual configuration as well as a form of discourse – allows for a systematic connection between educational practices as social activities and the systematic language choices that realise them.

From the perspective of register, classroom discourse involves most saliently particular meaning choices construing **field** (the social activity taking place) and enacting **tenor** (the social relations established between participants)[1] (see Martin, 1992 for a discussion on the notion of register). In classroom discourse, field can be understood as the knowledge being construed and taught

in the classroom. More specifically, this knowledge corresponds to the **field of educational knowledge** (Hood, 2010), which refers to the disciplinary content being transmitted in the educational practice. The key metafunction at stake in the construal of field and therefore in the construal of disciplinary knowledge is the ideational metafunction (Martin, 2007). The second dimension of register considered, tenor, facilitates an understanding of the pedagogic relation established between teacher and student from the point of view of the context of situation and relates to the interpersonal dimension of classroom discourse, particularly regarding the negotiation of roles in the interaction.

2.2. The structuring of classroom discourse

Classroom discourse is described in the SFL framework as a structured form of interaction through language, organised as a basic unit around which all discourse unfolds. This unit corresponds to the **learning activity** (Rose & Martin, 2012). The basic principle underpinning the description of this unit is that all learning occurs around the performing of a task on the part of students; furthermore, it is around this task that all the process of teaching/learning is organised. A learning activity is thus defined as a minimal complex unit unfolding around a micro task. The centre of the learning activity corresponds to a Task phase, around which up to four other phases may occur. The orbital structure of the learning activity is presented in Fig. 1.

The *Task* corresponds to the activity carried out by the student – answering a question, reading or writing a text, etc. This phase strongly predicts the phases at the nucleus, *Focus* – specifying the Task phase to be performed by the student – and *Evaluate* – the assessment of Task by the teacher. Two other phases appear at the margin: *Prepare*, where the teacher provides context or knowledge relevant to the Task; and *Elaborate*, where the Task performed by the student is used as a stepping stone for the further development of concepts and the construal of pedagogic knowledge (Rose & Martin, 2012). The exploration of the classroom discourse of popular education proposed here will be structured around the learning activities unfolding in it.

2.3. Exploring the construal of knowledge in classroom discourse: ideational resources

Within the SFL framework, knowledge is understood as the representation of experience through language (cf. Halliday, 1995). Thus, the study of the construal of knowledge in the classroom discourse of popular education considers ideational resources from the discourse-semantics stratum, particularly **taxonomic relations** and **nuclear relations**, from the system of IDEATION (Martin, 1992). These analytical tools are complemented by **resources for the creation of specialised language** (Martin, 1993) at the lexicogrammar stratum.

Taxonomic relations are the chains of relations across clauses of text between elements representing people, things, processes, qualities and places (Martin, 1992). They are oriented towards the classification of entities of the world in two kinds of taxonomies: **classification** and **composition** taxonomies. The former refers to taxonomies of the world in terms of relations of class and member; the latter, to taxonomies in terms of whole and part. Each of these kinds of taxonomic relations is realised in language through different sets of lexical relations. Table 1 summarises some of these lexical relations, which have been chosen based on the nature of the data explored here. Examples provided emerge from the general field of education.

Taxonomic relations are key discursive resources for the construal of specialised knowledge, as an important aspect of the way experience is represented in discourse is the complexity and del-

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[1] Classroom discourse also involves particular meaning choices in mode – i.e. a specific way of organising the linguistic resources construing this discourse. However, as the focus of this exploration is the content and the pedagogy enacted in teaching practice (i.e. field and tenor, respectively), the study will not attend at this point to the meaning choices in mode.