



Language, learning, and teacher professionalism: An investigation of specialized language use among pupils, teachers, and student teachers



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ABSTRACT

This article discusses how language use affects reasoning and learning in educational settings. Interactions among (1) pupils in upper secondary school, (2) teachers in upper secondary school, and (3) student teachers studying to become secondary teachers were analyzed. While previous studies have examined language use among pupils, teachers, and student teachers, respectively, little research has combined these perspectives. As such, this study provides additional insight into the educational discourse. Drawing on sociocultural, dialogical perspectives on learning, the authors of this article found that the inclusion of specialized language promotes learning and enhances professional awareness. These findings hold implications for teacher education and teacher professional development.

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1. Introduction

Teachers are expected to stimulate students and give them opportunities to learn by transforming the subject matter into teachable and learnable pieces. Fostering classroom dialogue is one way to orchestrate learning situations through dialogue among pupils. This commonly requires changing the verbal behaviour in the classroom, which is not straightforward or easy (Topping & Trickey, 2014). Solutions have focused on training teachers to change their verbal practises and encourage productive pupil talk through increased use of reasoned argumentation (Gillies, 2014). Topping and Trickey (2014) echoed this sentiment, arguing that “implementing effective dialogic collaborative learning requires changes in the verbal and non-verbal behavior of both teacher and pupils” (p. 69).

Changing the verbal behaviour in the classroom requires conscious use of language. The point of departure is that language is a central tool for learning (Vygotsky, 1986), through which certain types of content are thought about and acted on (Gee, 2004), and that education includes socializing learners into specialized language practises (Wells, 1999; Wertsch, 1991). These assumptions are based on dialogical, sociocultural theories of learning, implying that meaning is constructed through interactions between individuals and their environments (Linell, 1998, 2009; Vygotsky, 1986; Wertsch, 1991). In

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line with Gee (2004), the authors assert that specialized language is significantly different from everyday language, not by excluding everyday vocabulary from the language, but by including subject-specific terminology.

The authors' past research (Brevik, 2014; Fosse, 2011; Rødnes, 2012) has suggested striking similarities in interactions among pupils, teachers, and student teachers regarding specialized language use and learning. In this study, the authors therefore reanalyze data from three studies, exploring how and why language matters in educational interactions where specialized language is applied. The argument made in this article is that pupils, teachers, and student teachers benefit as learners from using specialized language within specific discourses. This assertion is examined across the three different groups of actors.

1.1. Research question

Against this background, the present article pursues the following research question: how does the use of specialized language among pupils, teachers, and student teachers influence their reasoning and learning?

In the following sections, the authors first review empirical studies that shed light on how specialized language is used in educational interactions among pupils, teachers, and student teachers, before presenting the theoretical framework applied. A discussion of the methods and findings in light of the reviewed literature and the theoretical framework follows. Finally, implications for teacher education and teacher professional development (TPD) are discussed.

2. Review: studies of language use in education

This review presents studies of language use in interactions involving pupils, teachers, and student teachers. The focus is on the role of specialized language in relation to reasoning and learning.

2.1. Pupils' language use

A study of the PISA 2009 reading assessment showed that pupils understand texts written in everyday language better than texts written in academic language (Frønes, Narvhus, & Aasebø, 2013), suggesting a need for more focus on how pupils can enhance their understanding of texts written in less accessible language. Similarly, previous studies have found that pupils relate their reasoning about literary texts to their own lives and experiences (Asplund, 2010; Bommarco, 2006; Hvistendahl, 2000; Molloy, 2002; Smidt, 1988). This approach to literature may help pupils relate to the text and broaden their textual understanding (Rødnes & Ludvigsen, 2009). However, using everyday language to talk in a very integrated way (Rødnes, 2009) about their personal lives and subject matter made it difficult for the pupils to distinguish what was of use in educational settings; i.e. what to include in textual analysis or other assessment situations (Rødnes & Ludvigsen, 2009).

Several studies have suggested the need for more analytic approaches to enable pupils to expand their comprehension of the text (e.g. Kaspersen, 2004; Olin-Scheller, 2006; Penne, 2006; Smidt, 1988; Tengberg, 2011). Studies investigating pupils working with literary texts have shown that they often profit from incorporating specialized language. For instance, providing a list or "think sheet" of what to include in a literary analysis had a positive effect on pupils' writing (Lewis & Ferretti, 2009). In a similar way, the use of specialized language as a text-analytical tool has been found to promote pupils' literary reasoning in group interactions in a class where the teacher focused on introducing concepts related to their work on multimodal texts (Rødnes, 2012). Together, the findings of previous studies have suggested that including different kinds of specialized language helps pupils broaden their textual understanding. Likewise, several of these studies have revealed that it is vital for pupils to apply specialized language in classroom-based talk and for teachers to model and guide students' practise and independent use of such language.

2.2. Teachers' language use

In a similar fashion, studies among teachers have indicated that shared language is important if they are to discuss teaching among themselves and in the classroom. Garcia, Pearson, Taylor, Bauer, and Stahl (2011) noted that "it requires the use of shared language to identify and analyze an issue" (p. 151). Horn and Little (2010) revealed that two groups of teachers interacted in different ways when discussing problems related to teaching. One group connected experience-based problems from the classroom with analytical tools that supported their meaning making, while the other group did not. The researchers concluded that more learning occurred in the first group, who had discussed their classroom experiences using specialized language. This finding was echoed by Afdal and Nerland (2012), who compared the way Norwegian and Finnish novice teachers talked about their practise. Afdal and Nerland (2012) argued that expressing knowledge about teaching practises was more challenging for the Norwegian teachers, who based their interactions on everyday language and experience-based knowledge. In contrast, the Finnish teachers had developed a more analytical way of thinking and used more specialized language to express their practises.

In a study where teachers applied a new tool in their teaching, Ross and Bruce (2007) observed that the combination of classroom experiences with the new tool provided the teachers with a shared language for observation and discussion. Further, in her review of professional development studies, Avalos (2011) suggested the importance of teacher co-learning as an analytical tool. Similarly, a study by Brevik (2014) indicated that a group of teachers articulated their knowledge and

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