Observing, resisting, and problem-posing language and power: Possibilities for small stories in inservice teacher education

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ABSTRACT

Given the role of literacy education in (re)producing both oppressive and emancipatory language ideologies, teacher education must attend to teachers' developing understandings of language and language learning. In this study, we examine one possible tool for building such understandings: through the telling of small stories. Focusing on small stories told during discussion of language variation within a graduate education course, we analyzed thirty such stories to identify how they were used to build identity positions and discourses of language. Three types of small stories were identified, each positioning the teller in distinct ways with regards to power and agency: as passive observer, as active resister, or as uncertain participant. These findings suggest affordances and constraints for using these types of narratives to examine and construct language ideologies within teacher education.

1. Introduction

As Hazel, a first-grade teacher, discussed an assigned reading on language variation with her peers in a master's course, she shared an experience from her classroom:

> I was sitting in a small group and we were practicing sight words, and um, one of my students who is an ELL [English Language Learner], he read the word, it was 'yes' but he read 'si', and the kid next to him was like, "You read the word wrong. That's not the word. You don't know how to read that word." And I was like, "Hold on a second, why did he read that word?"

In this brief recounting, Hazel implicitly connected her experience to the course readings, illustrating how language separation and standardization can be subtly reinforced through social interaction within a classroom. In revoicing her own question, she also suggested a role teachers might play in interrogating these dominant understandings of language. Engaging in practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) as teacher educators in Hazel's graduate program, we became curious about the role of narratives like this one, which Bamberg & Georgakopoulou (2008) term *small stories*. How might such small stories allow teachers to make connections between their daily classroom practice and the theories explored in teacher education?

For teachers of literacy, theories of language are particularly relevant to pedagogical practice. Such teachers are typically expected to focus instruction not only on literacy development (reading and writing), but also on building orality (speaking and listening) (c.f., Common Core State Standards). The increasing attention to language in curricular standards typically manifests as planned instructional activities (Godley et al., 2007) or corrections of student language (Dyson & Smitherman, 2009; Martinez, 2017; Razfar, 2005). These approaches, not informed by linguistics (Denham, 2015), may encourage teachers to (re)produce dominant language ideologies, or sets of beliefs about language and its intersections with race, literacy, and other topics (Alim, Rickford, & Ball, 2016; Kroskrity, 2004). Conversely, teachers can intentionally disrupt these dominant language ideologies and introduce more critical approaches to language through their instructional practice (Godley & Loretto, 2013; Gort & Sembiante, 2015; Vetter, 2013; Zavala, 2015).

Teacher education, then, can work towards justice by supporting teachers in developing critical understandings of language that lead to more complex and informed practices around orality and literacy. To do so, it must provide teachers with spaces not only to discuss justice-oriented pedagogical theories but also to consider the tensions that arise when enacting these pedagogies in their K-12 classrooms (Casey, 2016; Cochran-Smith, 2010). The distance, both spatially and temporally, between K-12 and teacher

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education classrooms poses challenges in this work. Our analysis contributes to an emerging body of research exploring how teacher education might support teachers in developing more critical orientations towards language (e.g., Bacon, 2017; Godley, Reaser, & Moore, 2015; McBee Orzulak, 2013, 2015). Seeking to explore how connections might be made between the often detached spaces of K-12 and university teacher education, we centered our analysis on how small stories might allow teachers to connect their classroom experiences to these developing orientations towards language, oriented around the following research question: How do teachers construct relationships between language, literacy, and teaching through the telling of small stories? In this analysis, we particularly attended to the ways teachers positioned themselves within those small stories and how such positionings related to their developing understandings of these topics.

2. Theoretical framework

To guide our exploration of this research question, we view our work through two theoretical lenses. First, we conceptualize beliefs about language as language ideologies, drawing on work in linguistic anthropology to consider the causes and consequences of existing orientations towards language. Second, we theorize the role of narrative in social interaction, focusing particularly on how small stories serve as a tool for meaning-making and positioning.

2.1. Theorizing language ideologies

At a basic level, language ideologies represent sets of beliefs about not just language as a concept but about how language should be used (Errington, 2001). Schools, as political and social institutions, play an important role in (re)producing what Philips (1998) terms *hegemonic language ideologies*, or ideologies that serve to maintain the power of such institutions. Ignoring the actual complexity of language practice, standardizing ideologies position a single language variety as the sole correct or appropriate variety (Kroskrity, 2000), and schools reify these ideologies by orienting literacy instruction around a single language variety deemed the 'standard' (Milroy, 2001). Due to the indexical relationship between language and social groupings (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), language ideologies intertwine with ideologies of race and class (Wiley, 2000), such that views of a particular community can be expressed through views of their language practices. Within the United States, for instance, racism towards African Americans is often mobilized through critiques of African American Language (Alim et al., 2016; Rosa & Flores, 2017).

In classrooms, then, language ideologies align with other circulating ideologies to mediate how students are positioned in the classroom. Based on their language and literacy practices, students can be deemed successful or struggling, literate or illiterate (Dyson, 2015; Wortham, 2001a). While hegemonic ideologies have a strong pull, multiple language ideologies circulate within any classroom. Both teachers (Martínez, Hikida, & Durán, 2015; Palmer, 2011) and students (López, 2012; Martínez, 2013) enact multiple and at times conflicting language ideologies, with standardized testing mediating the actions of both (Henderson, 2017). And while it is often teachers who are institutionally tasked with (re)producing standardizing language ideologies through instruction, this ideological work can be done by students as well (Handsfield & Crumpler, 2013; Jang, 2017), suggesting teachers must be prepared to respond to students' language ideologies as well as critically reflect upon their own practice.

Responding to the need for teachers to identify and interrogate such ideologies (Alfaro and Bartolomé, 2017), there is a growing body of scholarship exploring how teacher education

might support teachers in this work. While many teachers, like the general public, hold negative orientations towards what they deem to be nonstandard language use (Litzenberg, 2016; Nguyen, 2012), engaging with topics of language variation and language ideology in teacher education coursework can shift these orientations. Studies have examined the influence of a variety of methods with preservice and inservice teachers, including devoting portions of coursework explicitly to multidialectism (Bacon, 2017) or critical language awareness (Godley et al., 2015); "close reading of counterhegemonic texts" (Murillo, 2010, p. 283); considering "linguistic ideological dilemmas" (McBee Orzulak, 2015, p. 187); and having students examine community beliefs about language (Ek, Machado-Casas, Sánchez, & Smith, 2011) or engage in other action research projects (Razfar et al., 2015). While each of these approaches increased knowledge of language variation, in most cases teachers' deficit-oriented and standardizing language ideologies persisted. Godley et al. (2015), for instance, found teachers' appreciation for language variation increased, but the teachers remained reluctant to engage with the relationships between language variation, race, and power. Furthermore, McBee Orzulak (2015) found that teachers struggled to enact their more appreciative orientations towards language variation in their K-12 classrooms. These findings suggest that attending explicitly to how language and race intertwine with power are crucial in this teacher education work, while emphasizing the need to make connections between theories and research of language and the teaching practices in schools.

2.2. Theorizing small stories

Our attention to small stories arose from teachers' enactment and interrogation of language ideologies through narratives told during class discussion. While narratives often serve to represent and evaluate past events (Labov, 1972), a narrative cannot reproduce that event. Instead, it must be viewed primarily as an interactional event (Bamberg, 2006), in which one is always "narrating to *someone* and in *some context*" (Rymes, 2010, p. 371; emphasis in original). Narratives convey particular understandings about the world and thus can (re)produce and/or disrupt hegemonic ideologies (Baynham, 2000; Razfar, 2012; Souto-Manning, 2014). In interpreting past events, narrative retellings can allow consideration of multiple perspectives (McVee, 2005; Rogers & Mosley Wetzel, 2014), including imagining the event in new ways (Enciso, 2017; Tyson, 2016). Part of this work is done through positioning, both in how the speaker represents their self within the narrative and how they position themselves within the interactional event of its telling (Wortham, 2001b).

Research on narratives has typically studied extended speech events, such as those produced in sociolinguistic interviews (e.g., Labov & Waletzky, 1967). In focusing only on extended or 'grand' narratives, however, we might overlook the multiplicity of ways narrative is used in social interaction (Bamberg, 2006; Ochs & Capps, 2001). In response, some analysts have turned attention towards the telling of brief narratives within everyday life, or what Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) term *small stories*. They draw this term from two senses of 'small': in the literal sense, in that the narratives tend to be brief, and in the metaphorical sense, situating it within the analytic turn towards the micro-. From a critical perspective, an advantage of attending to small stories is that these are often counter-stories, illustrating tensions experienced by the teller (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Such contradiction is often missing in the lengthier narratives typically focused on in the literature, which tend to present an image of that world that is more coherent and settled than is actually experienced (Georgakopoulou, 2015).

This tendency of small stories to engage with tensions also provides affordances for analyzing identity construction, because