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The environment of a bilingual classroom as an interactional resource

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ABSTRACT

Both schoolscape studies and recent conversation analytic (CA) research on classroom interaction have demonstrated that material artefacts such as images, texts and different kinds of objects found in classrooms have a significant role in educational practice. This article turns the spotlight on social action within a bilingual classroom, exploring how participants visibly orient to the surrounding material environment during instructional interaction. The data consist of video-recorded lessons from secondary-level education. A multimodal conversation analytic investigation focuses on interactions during which participants attend to classroom texts and semiotic objects in ways that foreground language and content-related ideologies. Sequential analyses of selected data extracts aim to show the occasioned nature of classroom objects and some ways in which instructional practices both draw on and modify the already existing visual and textual environment. To conclude, the article reflects on the use of an interactional research approach in schoolscape studies.

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1. Introduction

In recent research on language and education, there has been an increasing interest in material practices in educational spaces. This interest has not only been articulated within the emerging research area of schoolscape, that is, the visual and material features of educational spaces (see e.g. Brown, 2012; Szabó, 2015), but it has also figured prominently in investigations of how (L2) learning materials are used in classroom interaction (Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013; Jakonen, 2015; Kunitz, 2015; Tainio, 2012). While these lines of inquiry share a conviction that the material environment is an important aspect of language education, they also have substantially different research foci. Put briefly, the work on schoolscape has its roots in research on linguistic landscapes and addresses the multimodal semiotics of public signage, focusing its investigation mainly on how such materials create and transmit language ideologies as well as construct specific literacy genres (for the latter, see e.g. Hanauer, 2009). On the other hand, the typical object of inquiry for conversation analytic (CA) studies of classroom interaction is social interaction itself, and, as far as (learning) materials are concerned, these studies are primarily interested in how they are used as resources for interaction in the local context of some sequentially-evolving activities.

In this article, I attempt to bring these two domains of inquiry together to explore the schoolscape of a bilingual classroom as a material and semiotic structure that can be attended to, drawn on and made sense of in social interaction. More specifically, I will not do what many prior schoolscape studies have already done, that is, examine classroom texts and images in and of themselves, but will instead focus the analysis on how such material resources are visibly used, engaged with and modified in classroom interaction for the purposes of providing instruction.

An investigation of the interactional use of classroom objects provides a window into understanding how instruction is shaped by ways of navigating the material environment, being accomplished through work that involves perceiving relevancies between objects of and for instruction, and making such relevancies visible to students. Doing this addresses two kinds of research gaps in the emerging schoolscape literature. Firstly, as Brown (2012, p. 295) notes, there is a need for studies that explore “the spoken component of landscapes in addition to their material counterparts”. Moreover, in order to understand the specific role of learning materials in (language) education, there is a need to consider how and when talk, text and objects intersect in routine social encounters in the classroom. Lastly, within research on schoolscape, there is a general lack of studies investigating how the ideologies that appear in texts and other materials are made relevant, received, subverted or otherwise treated by participants themselves in classroom interaction. The contribution of micro-interactional approaches such as CA for the schoolscape literature is that they can highlight the

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central role of mundane social action as a locus of negotiation about ideology.

The present study addresses these research gaps by exploring schoolscape in interactional use. It draws on a multimodal conversation analytic approach (Deppermann, 2013; Stivers & Sidnell, 2005) to investigate interaction within the material environment of a bilingual classroom, in situations of whole-class teaching where that environment and its objects become observably relevant for the participants. The article describes different kinds of orientations to the material environment and proposes some ways in which key aspects of the schoolscape – the constitution, (re)production and transformation of ideology – could be examined as interactional phenomena. ‘Ideology’ is a notoriously complex term that has received a tremendous amount of attention in prior linguistic and anthropological literature (for an overview, see e.g. Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994), and this study does not aim to provide a comprehensive account of it. Rather, ‘ideology’ is approached in a data-driven manner with the relatively simple working definition as presumptions about languages, their speakers and other kinds of groups of people. Finally, an additional aim of this paper is to reflect upon the use of interactional methodologies for schoolscape studies and to suggest some ways in which the analysis of social interaction could be integrated in schoolscape studies.

2. The language classroom as a material environment, its objects, and social interaction

The term ‘schoolscape’ refers broadly to the “visual and spatial organization of educational spaces” and directs scholarly attention on the “inscriptions and images and the arrangement of the furniture” (Szabó, 2015, p. 24) found in different places within school buildings. A key aspect of the investigation of schoolscape is the idea that that which is visually available to participants also constructs and transmits particular language ideologies. The central role of ideology can be seen in Brown’s (2012, p. 282) definition for the schoolscape:

the school-based environment where place and text, both written (graphic) and oral, **constitute, reproduce, and transform** language ideologies. Schoolscape project ideas and messages about what is officially sanctioned and socially supported within the school. (Brown, 2012, p. 282, emphasis added)

It is interesting, firstly, that the definition above adopts a broad understanding of text, subsuming under it both written and spoken language. Despite this, existing studies of schoolscape – and more generally of linguistic landscapes – have tended to focus the investigation on the written texts and graphic images found in (educational) spaces as opposed to participants’ spoken language and social interaction. It could be argued that this also has consequences for identifying who or what function as *agents* of the work of reproduction and transformation of language ideologies. In Brown’s definition above, for example, this is reflected in what could be termed as at least a partial erasure of human agency, visible in how ‘places’ and ‘texts’ (as opposed to individuals) are the agents that do such ideological work. Furthermore, ideology becomes visible in the distribution of languages and the relative prominence that different languages – majority, minority, regional, etc. – occupy within the schoolscape.

Spaces such as classrooms tend to be semiotically rich environments where participants quite routinely point at, talk about and handle different kinds of texts, objects and technological tools. Texts, inscriptions and images of the schoolscape can themselves have different temporalities, which Brown (2012, pp. 289–290) refers to with a distinction between temporary (or dynamic) and long-term schoolscape. Some texts are clearly long-term features

of classrooms, and for example posters or charts may be hung on classroom walls for the whole school year or even longer. On the other hand, some classroom texts such as those found on the blackboard are typically under constant modification, old ones being routinely erased and replaced with new text (e.g. Greiffenhagen, 2014). If we extend this thinking to the role of objects in social interaction in more general, a related distinction can be made between objects that are used as situated resources for doing some action and objects that are themselves practical accomplishments in that they emerge as a result of some social interaction (see e.g. Nevile, Haddington, Heinemann, & Rauniomaa, 2014).

In principle, any object can serve as a situated resource for social action, in the sense that it can be used to formulate actions such as questions or directives, as well as to support the accomplishment of broader activities such as task instructions or explanations. Besides the chalk and the blackboard, resources that are typically found in classrooms include learning materials such as written textbooks, interactive whiteboards, tablets and laboratory materials used for scientific experiments, to name just a few everyday material objects. In the specific context of language education, ‘learning materials’ tends to refer to written documents like textbooks, for which there is a global (and sometimes criticised) industry, worksheets and other texts that teachers produce for their specific purposes. Much of the existing research on language learning materials has focused on their design, and as Guerrettaz and Johnston (2013) note, there is, overall, a research gap in exploring how learning materials such as textbooks are treated in the social interaction of language classrooms.

However, the material nature of instruction and learning has been clearly demonstrated by a body of literature that has approached classroom interaction from a multimodal conversation analytic perspective. Taking the activity of explaining as an example, studies by Kupetz (2011) and Evnitskaya (2012) have shown how explanations of a scientific principle in the CLIL classroom can be constructed through the skilful handling of different kinds of objects found in the local environment, as a joint endeavour of all present parties. Kupetz’s (2011, pp. 126–128) study also demonstrates how drawing a sketch on a transparency, which is in turn shown to the class with an overhead projector, can be an important part of the explanation itself, a resource that is pooled together with the help of talk, gaze, gesture, inscription and classroom objects for the purposes of explaining. Moreover, in the foreign language classroom, explanations are routinely found during written task work, in which context pointing to and manipulating texts such as grammar worksheets can be typical resources for bringing them off (Majlesi, 2014). In such a case, the worksheet is also an example of the second kind of interactional object, as, once filled out, it is also the practical accomplishment of interaction and task activity. As the aforementioned suggests, of different schoolscape, classrooms are perhaps the central place to observe the production of and engagement with the textual environment, both temporary and longer-term.

Besides teacher-led instruction, different kinds of learning materials are important in task work. Students’ talk during task activities is in many ways intertwined with the ways that they manipulate texts or other instructional objects (Ford, 1999; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1992; Jakonen, 2015; Kääntä & Piirainen-Marsh, 2013; Szymanski, 2003). Classroom texts such as textbooks, in particular, can heavily frame students’ task work so that they become treated as the source where to ‘find’ information for task answers (see Jakonen, 2016b). In task contexts, it is not uncommon to see texts being treated as having the dual nature of being both a resource for interaction and an object of modification through writing. For example, studies by Markee and Kunitz (2013) and Kunitz (2015) show how students in an Italian as a second language class plan for a future oral presentation by producing written

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