



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Linguistics and Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/linged



Peer ecologies for learning how to read: Exhibiting reading, orchestrating participation, and learning over time in bilingual Mexican-American preschoolers' play enactments of reading to a peer

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 April 2017

Accepted 13 July 2017

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Children's peer interactions

Emergent reading

Conversation analysis

Participation

Multilingualism

Learning in interaction

Multimodal interaction

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how a friendship dyad of preschool children enrolled in a bilingual Spanish-English Head Start preschool in California, predominantly serving Mexican-American families, enact and orchestrate in play the activity of reading aloud to a peer. It examines how the child leading the reading uses embodied and multimodal resources to exhibit themselves as reading, including using environmental couplings of talk and gesture (C. Goodwin, 2013) and how the peer being read to uses embodied resources to exhibit that they are attending to the reading (Erickson, 2004; Hindmarsh et al., 2011). It also tracks transformations of the children's publicly visible and embodied knowledge states (C. Goodwin, 1981) across time, specifically, across two episodes of reading spaced several months apart, to illustrate how a "trajectory of knowing-in-interaction," or learning, (Melander, 2012), can be made visible. The examples contribute to a deeper understanding of the diverse ways in which children use verbal resources, their bodies and the material environment to accomplish the doing of reading as a public, shared, and mutually accountable activity. The examples also contribute to a deeper understanding of how children learn to act in culturally appropriate ways over time in shared reading activities, including how they "recalibrate" (M.H. Goodwin & Cekaite, 2013) reading action when expected embodied participation frameworks for doing reading are not exhibited from other participants.

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1. Introduction

According to research on emergent literacy, "children in literate societies have been found to have knowledge about written language long before reading conventionally from print. It is suggested that they are sorting out oral and written language relationships" (Sulzby, 1985:458). According to Sulzby, many children who are read to frequently by their parents also play at "reading" favorite storybooks themselves; they have been described as "teaching themselves to read" from favorite storybooks" that is, asking for a favored book "to be read over and over; correcting parents when they deviated from the text; or attempting to 'read' the book to themselves, to siblings, to dolls, or pets" (Sulzby, 1985:459). From these early literacy activities, children come away with a wealth of literacy skills long before they are actually reading. They develop a sense of story and story language, and come to understand that

pictures carry meaning and support the story (Sulzby, 1985). Many middle-class parents read to their children frequently and encourage these emergent literacy practices long before the children attend school (Sulzby, 1985).

Exposure to these practices is believed to serve as a foundation for engaging in the literacy practices required in U.S. schools. We know from the work of linguistic anthropologists that literacy practices such as these described by Sulzby for middle-class parents are ideological, "always embedded in social practices" of a community (Street, 2003:78; see also Heath, 1983, 2015; Avineri & Johnson, 2015; Bhimji, 2005; Zentella, 2005, 2015). Parents from other communities may "spend their time on other, more culturally significant activities" (Gaskins, 1999:50) or for other reasons (e.g., lack of resources) not engage in practices directly reflected in "Maintown" or mainstream U.S. schools (Heath, 1983). But could children learn U.S. school-related practices such as doing reading of favorite picture books from other sources? It has been argued that peers and siblings are sources of valuable language socialization experiences (Bhimji, 2005; Kyratzis, Tang, & Köymen, 2009). Can young child peers support one another in doing reading of favorite storybooks? With the exception of a small number of studies (e.g.,

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Gregory, 2001, who looked at mediation practices in interactions among child siblings at home), very little is known about peer support and about what children might learn about reading practices in real peer and sibling interactions.

This study examines how bilingual Spanish-English speaking children of Mexican heritage enrolled in a bilingual Spanish-English Head Start preschool in California practice reading books together, particularly, how they enact and orchestrate in play the activity of reading a book aloud to a peer. This reading activity is modeled for the children by their teacher. After breakfast each day, individual children are asked to read books aloud to their peers at their small groupwork table. Although Sulzby refers to such practices as “reading,” placing the verb “reading” inside quotation marks to denote the fact that children are not actually decoding written text from the page, for purposes of this paper, as children are engaging in emergent literacy practices of linking pictures and symbols on the page to orally dictated story content, I consider these practices as reading and will henceforth refer to them as such. Like all literacy practices, the practice of reading to peers at the small group table is culturally framed, consistent with the literacy practices of a particular community (Heath, 1983; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2012; Street, 2003), which in this case, is the community of English-medium public school education in California, for which the preschool is preparing the children. The children show agency in that they appropriate this reading activity and enact it among themselves during free play time (see also de León, *this issue*). Within these enactments of reading to a peer, the children frame the interaction and signal for one another “what it is they are doing now, displaying for others what constitutes the common scene in front of them” (M.H. Goodwin, 1993:160; Goffman, 1974). Children must project their own understandings of the actions that constitute reading and have those understandings ratified (or not) (C. Goodwin, 1984, 2000, 2010, 2013; M.H. Goodwin, 1990) by other peers. Through these enactments then, children can learn a great deal about what constitutes reading in their classroom (and in the American school system more generally).

To understand how the children frame these enactments of reading to a peer, how the peers ratify reading actions in the sequence of interaction, and what the children learn about written language and literacy through participating in these activities, I take an approach to understanding such cognitive activities which is rooted in conversational analysis, ethnography, and interactional sociolinguistics, and which I review below.

2. Exhibiting reading: cognition situated in human interaction

2.1. Participation

The approach which I take to analyzing these child peer-based reading activities is rooted in recent accounts of situated cognitive activities which have been framed within conversational analysis (C. Goodwin, 1984, 1994, 2000, 2010), ethnography, and interactional sociolinguistics (Erickson, 1982, 2004; Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 2005). Charles Goodwin recommends that an activity such as a story-telling (or in the case under study here, the activity of one peer reading to another) be viewed as a “multi-party interactive field” (C. Goodwin, 2006:12) within which “multiple participants are building in concert with each other the actions that define and shape their lifeworld” (2000:75). What structures constitute the reading, story, sentence, etc. are specified, not through interviewing, but “through study in detail of the actions [participants] perform as the talk itself emerges” (C. Goodwin, 1984:243). The participants who shape the reading, narrative, etc. include hearers as well as speakers (C. Goodwin, 1984, 2015; C. Goodwin &

M.H. Goodwin, 2004; Erickson, 2004), all of whom have “visible cognitive lives” (C. Goodwin, 2015:1). Participants’ understandings’ of the activity in progress, and of the stance and alignment they take to that activity, are displayed through their actions. They also hold one another accountable for these actions, which in turn are embedded in the participants’ larger social projects (C. Goodwin & M.H. Goodwin, 2004) and help construct the “social and political organization” (M.H. Goodwin, 1990; C. Goodwin, 2015:1) among them. The notion of “participation” (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004), actions exhibiting “forms of involvement performed by parties within evolving structures of talk” (2004:222), captures how these “multi-party interactive fields” (C. Goodwin, 2006) are co-constructed and reflexively emerge in the interaction through the embodied practices of multiple participants. Ethnography can enrich the analysis of participation by providing knowledge of the range of concerns and forms of social organization which are possible for the friendship or peer group in question (Evaldsson, 2007; Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2012; M.H. Goodwin, 1990, 2006).

The interplay of these situated and deeply interactional processes have been documented in several studies. For example, M.H. Goodwin (1990) has documented how, for a peer group of African-American girls’ in Philadelphia, the content and participation structures of their extended he-said-she-said narratives were deeply embedded in local social and political processes of the peer group. Similar interactional processes have been documented in other studies of children’s narratives of different sorts, including pretend play and future planning narratives and gossip stories (Evaldsson, 2002, 2007; M.H. Goodwin, 2006; Kyratzis, 1999, 2007). Relying on Goffman’s notions of framing and footing (Goffman, 1981) and Goodwin and Goodwin’s constructs of “participation” (2004), I will examine how the activity of one peer reading to another, as a multi-party interactive field, is exhibited, co-constructed, and reflexively emerges in the interaction through the embodied practices of multiple participants, and how these practices are rooted in (and reflexively help constitute) certain forms of alignment (Goffman, 1981) and social political organization among participants.

2.2. Epistemic ecologies: embodied participation frameworks, objects, and local epistemic identities as knowing and unknowing in interaction

To understand how the activity of one peer reading to another is exhibited and interactionally accomplished, one must consider the material environment in which the participants’ reading action emerges, including the embodied participation framework (C. Goodwin, 2013) within which the reading activity occurs. As noted by Charles Goodwin, in collaborative activities such as archaeologists doing excavation and categorization work together, participants “build action by laminating different kinds of meaning-making resources together” (Goodwin, 2013:16). These include: “the mutual orientation of the participants’ bodies toward each other,” language, “hands making environmentally coupled gestures,” and other phenomena (e.g., objects, such as dirt) “being intensely scrutinized by the participants as part of the work they are doing together” (2013:16). He termed these environments and embodied participation frameworks “public substrates” (2013) and “ecologies of sign systems” (C. Goodwin, 2006, p. 38). Moreover, as these embodied participation frameworks determine the ways in which participants are positioned with respect to one another in terms of what they can see and know (C. Goodwin, 2010; M.H. Goodwin & C. Goodwin, 2012), he termed these embodied participation frameworks “epistemic ecologies” (C. Goodwin, 2013:8, 15–16, 20, 21; 2010). These ecologies or environments are crucial, as “cognition emerges through the ongoing and systematic transformation of environments that contain a range of structurally

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