Analyzing discourse analysis: Teachers' views of classroom discourse and student identity

Joseph C. Rumenapp

Judson University, Creekside South, 1151 North State Street, Elgin, IL 60123, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

In the current context of urban schools, strict curricula and rigid teaching practices are often used in schools with high linguistic and cultural diversity. To understand how teachers can use more equitable teaching methods in classrooms, it is important to explore how teachers make sense of multifaceted student identities and how those identities play a role in making instructional decisions. Drawing on a discursive understanding of identity, this paper reports on a study that seeks to analyze two cases of teachers who employed discourse analysis with classroom transcripts in a community of practice and how this may lead to new understandings of student identity, particularly in multilingual contexts. As teachers appropriated the research practices of discourse analysis, they began to shift in the way they understood their students' identities, from initially viewing them through institutional lenses to understanding the agentive positions that students took up in classroom discourse. This study yields implications for teacher development as well as furthering understanding about the relationship between language and identity in urban schools.

1. Introduction

While external observations of learning processes, contexts, and instructional methods have often driven educational research, understanding lived experiences of teachers and students provides deeper insight into teaching and learning. Furthermore, to gain insight into the instructional decisions, understanding the world from teachers' perspectives is important. In an education system that is increasingly focused on standardization (Darling-Hammond, 2010), it is important to remember that classrooms are growing diverse in new ways, often due to changing and increasing migration patterns, technology, and globalization (Hull, Zacher, & Hibbert, 2009). This juxtaposition of increased diversity and increased standardization merits further inquiry into the relationship between how teachers understand their role in the classroom, how they understand their students, and how they understand the relationship between teaching and learning.

Though teachers understand who students are in moment-to-moment interaction, they may not explicitly reflect on the way they view students. For example, Lee (2009) notes that Asians and Asian Americans are often stereotyped as a "model minority," which has,

in some cases, led to the assumption that students do not need special services that would regularly be offered (Lew, 2004; Yang, 2004). The assumptions that Asian students are high-achieving and well-behaved are often carried into the classroom and are not critiqued. The operating narratives around these identities play a role in the way teachers plan for instruction and are implicit in instructional decisions. Teachers who engage in reflective practices such as using discourse analysis to understand classroom discourse may challenge static notions of students and understand the discursive stances taken in classroom interaction. Using this type of reflection may also draw out implications for pedagogy and the social organization of the learning environment (Razfar et al., 2015). Therefore this paper explores how teachers' analyses of classroom discourse may change their understanding of student identities and what implications there may be for instruction.

While engaging in reflective practice can be done in a variety of ways, one notable form of reflection is action research, a methodologically rigorous form of inquiry intended to lead to practical change (Reason & Bradbury, 2013). Though there may be a number of theories, methods, foci or purposes of action research, they share in common that they are "action-oriented research activity in which ordinary people address common needs arising in their daily lives and, in the process, generate knowledge" (Park, 2006, p. 83). Linguistic research methods, such as discourse analysis, may

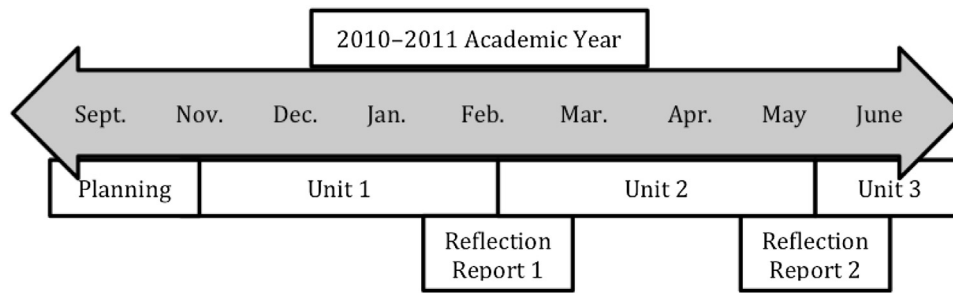*E-mail addresses:* joseph.rumenapp@judsonu.edu, jcrumenapp@gmail.com

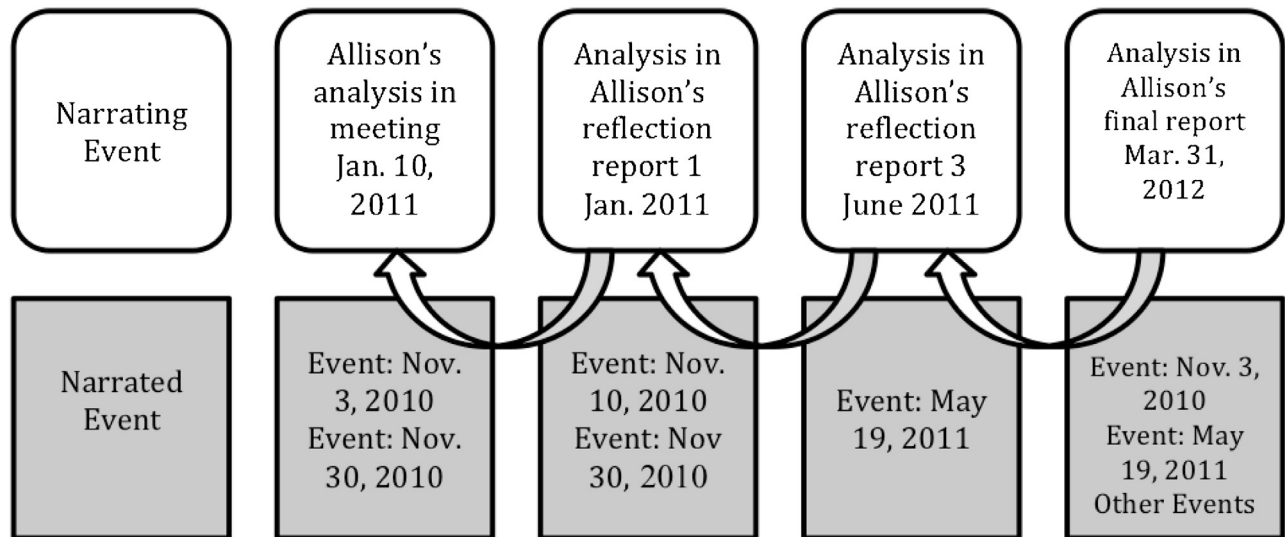**Fig. 1.** Timeline of the action research project.

Fig. 2. Allison's discourse analysis trajectory.

be used to analyze classroom data, leading to transformational changes (Martín-del-Campo, García, Lorca, de las Heras Mínguez, & del Rosario Díaz-Perea, 2010; Razfar, 2012). Developing discourse focused research processes may allow teachers to view students' identities in new and more nuanced ways, which may allow for a change in pedagogical decisions.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Analyzing classroom discourse

Discourse analysis focuses on the nature of language *in use*. This includes, in the narrowest sense, the relationship between multiple utterances and in the broadest, the relationship between language use and language ideologies (Razfar, 2005). Linguistic acts are meaningful only in the context of language ideologies, which are identified through the indexical qualities of language (Silverstein, 1992, 2003). Language ideologies research has noted that classroom discourse patterns, such as repairing student talk, index particular ideologies held by social actors about language and the relationship between language and identity (Razfar, 2005, 2010). Furthermore, Razfar and Rumenapp (2011) demonstrated that language ideologies played a mediating role in the social organization of the classroom.

A range of traditions has developed to study classroom discourse specifically. Conversation analysis (CA) (Psathas, 1995; Schegloff, 2007) has been widely used to observe turn taking in social settings (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), adjacency pairs (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973), repair (Bae & Oh, 2013; Razfar, 2005, 2010; Schegloff,

Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977), and so forth. Cazden (1988), using CA to study classroom discourse, found that the Initiate, Respond, Evaluate (IRE) structure was often a dominant approach to teaching and learning. In such an instance, the teacher and student are juxtaposed so that the teacher controls the questioning and evaluation pattern, though students may challenge it or assert agency to claim discursive space (Baynham, 2006). Skidmore and Murakami (2012) explained that the power of CA is in the fine-grained analysis that allows investigators to look at how the function of the structure of talk is co-constructed between students and teachers. Others have noted that the *function* of dyadic and triadic structures, such as IRE, in classroom dialogue is of primary importance in understanding classroom discourse because they can achieve many different goals within interactional contexts (Kibler, 2011; Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003; Wells, 2001). CA can also be particularly useful in implementing new instructional strategies by attending to the role language structure plays in constructivist paradigms of education and attempting to modify the classroom talk to allow for constructivist strategies (Martín-del-Campo et al., 2010).

CA has also been extensively applied in second language acquisition (SLA) by Firth and Wagner (1997). Gardner (2008) noted that while a heavily applied focus on discourse patterns can result in restrictive practices in the classroom, CA can be applied to address pedagogical decisions connected to identity in second language (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). While interlocutors are generally perceived within groups such as native/non-native (Park, 2007), Bae and Oh (2013) noted that identities should be understood not as "stable private properties but interactional achievements" (p. 20).