Language-Learning: The Importance of Access to Community

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This article is based on data derived from a four-year ethnographic study that followed two cohorts of ESL learners enrolled in mainstream Canadian primary classrooms from kindergarten through grade 2. It draws on sociocultural theory, based on the work of the Russian scholars Vygotsky and Bakhtin and developed in North America by Lave and Wenger (1991), Rogoff (1994), and others. In the article, we examine classroom practices that appear to offer our participants access to the linguistic resources of their community and those in which our participants appear to have limited access to these resources. Choral and small-group activities are contrasted with Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) sequences to show contrasting possibilities for access. We argue that speech situations in classrooms that are ludic or playful, that, in Bakhtin's (1981) terms, offer ever new ways to mean, are those in which children have the possibility of appropriating the words of others and of finding voices and utterances for themselves.

> It is ... essential that we take into account the interactional circumstances that position the people in the world with a differential access to the common tongue. (McDermott, 1993, p. 283)

Introduction

In second-language acquisition research, access to language has commonly been conceptualized in terms of *comprehensible input* (Krashen, 1981; Long, 1985; Porter, 1986), and the focus has often been on determining how speakers modify their input so as to make it more comprehensible to second-language learners (Antón & diCamilla, 1998). The focus of our work is different. Working with children with a minority-language background attending an English-medium school, we have been concerned with the specific interactional arrangements in classrooms that seem to provide children differential access to English, conceptualized as a community resource.

Our interest in the specific contexts in which children learn second languages is informed by our reading of sociocultural or sociohistorical theory based on the work of the Russian scholars Vygotsky and Bakhtin and developed in North America by researchers interested in social and cultural aspects of development and learning (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991, 1998). Fundamental to this

approach is the assumption that "learning and development occur as people participate in the sociocultural activities of their community" (Rogoff, 1994, p. 209). For these theorists, social activities are "mediated" through the use of culturally and historically formed artifacts or tools. In this perspective, the persons, the activities, and the tools have been variable foci for analysis and are shown to be inextricably linked one to another.

Vygotsky (1978) was of the opinion that material mediations or tools are parallel in many ways to *psychological tools*: natural languages, counting systems, mnemonic devices, writing, signs, and so on. Seeing language as a tool, parallel in some ways to a material tool, is a radical departure from our way of seeing language as part of (or at least housed in) the mind. From a Vygotskian perspective, a second language could be seen as one among many mediating means used by persons in their participation in social activities.

Recent work by the United States anthropologists Lave and Wenger (1991) offers interesting new ways to think about how persons come to learn the use of the mediations of their communities. Lave and Wenger conceptualize the learning process as one of apprenticeship into communities of practice. These communities are formed by the relations of people engaged in specific, local, historically constructed, and changing practices. To become a full member of a community of practice requires access to a wide range of ongoing activity, to more expert members of the community, and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation.

Although second-language acquisition research has traditionally seen second-language learning as an individual cognitive phenomenon of internalization of second-language knowledge, this sociocultural perspective encourages us to see learning a second language as increasing one's participation in a community that uses this particular linguistic means to mediate community activities. Conducting research in classrooms from this perspective might involve examining relationships between and among the teacher and the children; the activities in which they engage; and the material, linguistic, and other intellectual resources with which they mediate their activities. Recognizing the dynamic interdependence between persons, practices, and resources makes such analysis extraordinarily complex.

We have been interested in ways of conceptualizing the differential access children have to classroom resources such as interaction with peers, teachers, classroom materials, and ideas. From this perspective, children who are learning English at school might be seen as participants in particular local communities where activities or practices[1] create possibilities for the children to make use of the tool, English (as well as many other socially derived tools). Previous research has examined how the social identities of learners are constructed in particular practices (Day, 1999a, 1999b; Hunter, 1997; McKay & Wong, 1996; Peirce, 1995) and how practices in particular contexts are

organized (Haneda, 1997; Toohey, 1998). In this article, we wish to focus on the accessibility of English, seen as a tool or resource, in particular classroom practices. Seeing English as a classroom resource to which different children have differential access introduces the notion of classrooms as having economic as well as instructional practices.

We examine practices that appear to offer our participants relatively unproblematic access to the linguistic resources of their community and others in which our participants appear to have relatively limited access to these resources. Our interest is in analyzing how we might understand, from the sociocultural theoretical perspective we find so promising, what it might be about particular practices that seems to facilitate learners' possibilities for coming to learn how to participate as members of their communities.

Methodology

The research reported here is part of a four-year ethnographic study that follows two cohorts of ESL learners enrolled in mainstream Canadian primary classrooms from kindergarten through grade 2. The setting for the study is a school in a suburban Canadian working-class neighborhood. About 50% of the children at the school have a language other than English as their home language, with a wide variety of languages represented, including Punjabi, Polish, Cantonese, Thai, French, Spanish, and several others. The remaining 50% have English as their home language.

The study involves two cohorts of children: the first cohort of six children (3 boys, 3 girls) was observed from the beginning of kindergarten to the end of grade 2. The second cohort of five children (1 boy, 4 girls) was observed in kindergarten and in grade 1. The language backgrounds of the children in the first cohort are Chinese, Polish, and Punjabi and in the second cohort Polish and Punjabi. Approximately 20 students in total were enrolled in each of the classrooms observed.

The study is situated in an ethnographic epistemological framework (Davis, 1995; Watson-Gegeo, 1988); and the complete methodology is described in Toohey (in press). We conducted half-day observations in the children's classrooms once a week over the school years, during which time we took field notes and audiotaped children as they went about their activities, collecting four to six audiotapes per observation. In addition, an experienced video technician from the university videotaped the children for two hours once a month, filming a range of instructional and noninstructional activities in which children were engaged. In collaboration with trained research assistants, we transcribed samples of audiotapes and all the videorecordings for the various years and assembled a complete case record for each classroom. We analyzed the data in an ongoing and recursive fashion, using triangulation to confirm, disconfirm, or check interpretations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1988; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Foci for analysis of data in this study are variable and include questions of positioning and identity (Day, 1999a, 1999b; Toohey, 1996) as well as school practices and their effects on the communities of practice in the classroom (Toohey, 1998). Our focus here is on how some discursive practices of the classroom seem to allow sharing of community linguistic resources and how some do not seem to allow this access. We begin by examining practices of open access.

Practices That Appear to Facilitate Access to Community Resources

One practice we observed in the study appeared strongly tied to the age of the children. In the kindergarten classroom, and rarely afterward, we observed frequent daily use of choral speech. From the beginning of the year, we observed the teacher engaging the children in reciting poems, chants, and series (e.g., days of the week, months of the year). In addition, the explicit literacy-preparatory activity in which they engaged, reading the "morning message," was also accomplished initially chorally, with the teacher obviously providing an oral model for the children for several repetitions of the event.

We take choral speech to be a practice that allows children ease of access to community resources. The audiorecordings in particular provided interesting evidence in this regard: in several cases, we were able to hear children initially participating tonally in choral speech without articulation of words, and moving more and more to clear articulation as the choral practice was repeated over the course of the year or other units of time. All the kindergarten children we observed, anglophone as well as minority-language-background children, increased their participation in the teacher-led choral activities over time. In addition, we often noticed children breaking into repetitions of the choral chants as they worked individually at their tables; this choral chanting became part of the "soundscape" of the classroom.

From the theoretical perspective we are exploring, what seems important with choral work is that children are able to participate from the beginning, albeit sometimes minimally, in the accomplishment of a classroom practice through the support offered by their community. By having access to a practice, by seeing-hearing that practice engaged in by the community as a whole, and by participating minimally, the child is able over time to appropriate that practice. Minimal participation by any child did not seem to be a matter of particular interest to the community. In choral speech, the *community* accomplishes the task. In addition, the pleasure that the children take in the rhythm of the choral work is obvious and appears important in their choices to engage in it even when the teacher is not leading.

In addition to the choral speech activities, the kindergarten teacher commonly engaged the children in choral singing. Singing appeared to be as pleasurable as, if not more pleasurable than, choral speech for the children; it

appeared that in some sense the songs "seduced" particular children into voice and gave them a safe position from which to speak.

Songs and rhymes also appeared to give the children a site for play with words and thoughts. The following exchange was recorded in the children's kindergarten year and occurred at the end of the morning session as the children were getting on their coats and preparing to leave. Sally (a child in whose home Polish is used) and Hari (a child in whose home Punjabi is used) engaged in a short conversation.

Sally: (_) have a big HEART.
Hari: Dicky dicky dinosaur eating the plant.
Sally: Ha, ha, ha. Dicky dicky dinosaur eating some hearts.
Hari: Dicky dicky dinosaur eating some plant, jump in the rock (?) and drink the water.
Sally: Dicky dicky dinosaur comes to our lake.
[Dicky dicky
Sally: [Dicky dicky dinosaur eat some plant
[dicky dicky
Hari: [dicky, dicky dinosaur swimming on the water.
(Audio-transcript, 1/23/97)[2]

This playful exchange created by the children is a variation on the rhyming story "Dicky, Dicky Dinosaur," which the teacher had just read to them (three minutes before). It is interesting that Hari introduces a line about eating the plant, as the teacher had just explained the meaning of the word *herbivore* to the children while reading the rhyming story.

An examination of the data reveals that all the elements in Sally and Hari's exchange were contained in the teacher's lessons about dinosaurs in the previous week. They were undoubtedly continued and repeated through thematic activities over the week, as was usual in this kindergarten. The incident illustrates how the language of the classroom is available to the children and used by them in play.

Data from this kindergarten classroom reveal that several other activities seem to ease access to the expertise of the community. On the same morning, the kindergarten teacher had given a demonstration on drawing dinosaurs, trying to aid children in recognizing that they were *bigger than* many common objects. She uses the pictures from a storybook she had just read about a little boy's encounter with a dinosaur to mediate the demonstration so that the children can see the size of a dinosaur relative to people and objects in the everyday world. With the children gathered about her, she shows the pictures, cueing the children with rising intonation, "Dinosaurs are bigger than ..." and the children responding with "people," "cars," "buildings," "houses," "buses."

She then assigns the seat work for the day: Children are to draw in their individual books "three things that dinosaurs are bigger than." She goes to the board and draws a tree and a dinosaur to show the children that the dinosaur is larger.

Teacher: OK, you need to make the dinosaur and the thing that it's bigger than. Mitchell, can you think of something that a dinosaur is bigger than?
Mitchell: A house
Teacher: Are bigger than a house, so I'll make a, a house (*teacher drawing house on board*) and then I need to make a
Child: (_)
Joanna: Long neck
Teacher: A dinosaur
Joanna: And it's a long neck
Teacher (*gesturing to her drawing*): Is he bigger than my house?
Children: Yaaa
Teacher: Yes, so you need to make sure that your picture shows that the dinosaur is bigger
Child: is bigger than [this
Teacher: [than something. Paula, what else is the dinosaur bigger than?
Paula: Um, squirrel
Teacher: Are bigger than a squirrel
Some children: [Squirrel!
Teacher: [Sally, a dinosaur is bigger than
Sally: Um, a person
Teacher: A person, oh let's see what (_) mine. Some dinosaurs are bigger than?
(*Teacher goes through her sample booklet like the one the children are to do*).
Child: A tree
Teacher and a few children: A tree
Teacher: Some dinosaurs are bigger than
A few children: [A house
Teacher: [A house
Teacher: Some dinosaurs are bigger than
More children: A flower
Teacher: A flower. Now did I make my dinosaurs actually bigger than those things? (_) This dinosaur is bigger than the flower. Wendy?
Wendy: Mouse.
Teacher: Is bigger than a mouse.
Child: (_) whose dinosaur is bigger than a mouse.
(Audio-transcript, 1/23/97)

The children (and the teacher) in this exchange answer chorally several times. Later in the lesson, as the children were working, we recorded the following:

Joanna: (_) bigger than a house (*then starts singing softly*) bigger than a a tree (?) bigger than a mama like a teddy bear, bigger than a horse
Paula: What is that?
Joanna (*singing*): Bigger than a house, bigger than a elephant
Paula: Bigger than the grass
Joanna (*singing*): Bigger than a pencil crayon and bigger than a
Joanna (*humming*).
(End of tape)

Field notes (1/23/97):
I notice Hari singing a tiny bit.
Then a bit afterwards, I hear Hari singing a bit: bigger than a house.
Sally from her end of the table calls out: bigger than a house.

We see in this excerpt possibilities the children have for accessing the language of their teacher and their peers through the specific circumstances of their play and work in the classroom. All the children together contribute to the soundscape of the classroom and to the developing expertise this community has, in this case, knowing what "dinosaurs are like." Although Mitchell and Joanna are more experienced speakers of English than the others, the practices or activities presented above show a community that shares its linguistic resources. Like the buckets of crayons on the tables from which children can help themselves as they need, these activities facilitate opportunities for all children to access words in the room and to practice with those words. The next set of practices we examined appear to operate somewhat differently.

Practices That Appear to Block Access to Community Resources

Certain practices appear to make it more difficult for children to benefit from the expertise of their peers. The first such practice we consider is the whole-group-discussion format that was common in the classrooms where we observed (as it is reported to be in many classrooms, compare Cazden, 1988; Gutierrez & Larson, 1994; Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1997; Wertsch, 1998). This is teacher-led discussion with large groups of children in which the teacher asks a question, students respond individually, and teachers provide evaluative comments to the student responders. Sometimes called the IRE, to reflect its structure of Teacher-Initiation, Student-Response, Teacher-Evaluation, this common classroom genre has been extensively studied by many authors in first- and second-language education and sociocultural theory (Cazden, 1988; Edwards & Westgate, 1994; Gutierrez & Larson, 1994; Long & Sato, 1983; Nystrand et al., 1997; Mehan, 1979; Wertsch,

1998). Particularly with regard to sequences in which teachers ask test-questions (Nystrand et al., 1997), observers are critical of the practice in terms of the limited possibilities it offers students for meaning-making. Such observers point out that the practice develops teacher meanings rather than student meanings, and it permits students little access to the floor. Some observers have, however, pointed out that meaning-making in IREs can be variable and that its limitations are not so apparent when students are not required to respond individually and when they are asked open questions. For recent descriptions of IRE sequences that do seem to facilitate students' access to community resources, see Hall (1998), Lin (1996), and Toohey, Waterstone, and Julé (in press).

The following is a short excerpt from a much longer IRE sequence in which the topic is "Canada's Food Guide" and "Food Groups." This excerpt involves Surjeet, one of the study's focal children, in grade 2. With the children seated on the floor around her, the teacher opened the discussion asking for the name of one of the food groups:

Teacher: No Surjeet, it's not on the ceiling dear; it's right up here in front of you. Tell me the name of *one* food group, one of the four food groups.
5-second pause
Surjeet: (*quietly*) Apple?
Teacher: Surjeet, I need the name of the *entire* food group. Apple is part of a particular food group. The names are written right there dear.
They're printed right there. All you need to do is read it dear.
11-second pause
What's the name of that food group, that apple belongs to?
Surjeet: (*answers very quietly*)
Teacher: I can't hear you honey, a little louder.
Surjeet: Veg-e-tables, veg-e-tables
Teacher: Pardon me? (*leans forward, 6-second pause*)
What is an apple, dear?
Surjeet: Fruit
Teacher: An apple is a fruit so it belongs to the fruit and?
Surjeet: Vegetables
Teacher: Thank you dear. The fruit and vegetable group.
(Video-transcript, 4/97)

As can be seen above, in many ways this IRE is organized in such a way that it seems almost opposite to choral speech or singing. The teacher-enforced rule "one speaker at a time" is regulative; refusal to participate, flawed or minimal participation is salient, and teacher evaluation provides consequences for refusal, flawed or minimal participation. When one student is individually called on to answer, that student does not at that moment

have access to the expertise of peers or even of the teacher. We have many examples in our data of IRE sequences, and we notice that several of our participants in cohort 1 frequently declined bids to participate or provided minimal responses in such settings. In the case of a few children, we noticed decreasing participation in IRE sequences over the course of their school years. We also noticed that students who had appeared competent with regard to the intellectual demands of the teacher's questions in other settings appeared much more tentative and less confident in these sorts of discussions.

Many critics of IRE practices in classrooms (e.g., Long & Porter, 1985) recommend small-group work, citing its advantages in providing students with more turns at talk. Some advocates also hypothesize that horizontal status relations among the students will allow collaboration in accomplishing school tasks. It has become clear to us in the classrooms we have observed that some small-group work does seem to facilitate students' access to the knowledge of peers and the community as a whole.

During one observation, a grade 2 teacher was reading the children a picture book, and she stopped reading after every page or so and directed the children to speak to a partner and speculate about what might come next in the story. In the conversation between Amy (native Cantonese speaker) and Mary (a native English speaker), we see a lively and obviously pleasurable discussion:

Mary: With the um woods on your head and the mountain would move far far away and you could dig and build your house again.
Amy: (_)
Mary: Yup
Amy: Okay, so that wise man said that
Mary: And that wise man was covered in smoke so they can't see him (*Both girls giggle*)
Amy: Yeah, the wise man sticks glue like this to your feet and put a log on your head and
Mary: No, like put the logs of your house on, no on,
[over your head and hold them and close your eyes
Amy: [over your head and hold them and close your eyes
Mary: [And keep on doing this for many hours
Amy: [And keep on doing this for many hours
And the mountain will go away, far far away
Mary: So they can build the house again (*starts to bounce*)
But -they -did -not- say -that- so -I -think- it- will- not- work
Amy: I think it will work
Mary: Well I think it will work too, uh, I gotta get up.
(Video-transcript, 2/97)

As conversational analysts have pointed out for some time, conversations can be like dances, and this "dance" in which Amy and Mary engage looks pleasurable and harmonious. Both contribute to the conversation, and despite Mary's longer experience with speaking English, Amy does not hesitate to disagree with her. This conversation is not long, and its specific characteristics are not shared in all the groups. Nevertheless, we think it points in promising directions.

Small-group conversations do not always appear so facilitative of access to community knowledge resources, however. Consider the following that occurred in the continuation of the Canada's Food Guide lesson with Surjeet described earlier. In this part of the lesson, children were paired and had to interview each other about their favorite food in each food group. The teacher had given general instructions on how to complete the sheet to the whole class, but Julie (whose first language is Polish) and Amy (whose first language is Cantonese) had just gone to the teacher for a repetition of the instructions. After the teacher explained again how they could interview each other:

Amy: Uh what's your favorite, um
Julie: [vegetable or grain]
Amy: [vegetable or grain] products
Julie: Ummmm
Amy: Did you know how to write cereal?
Julie: I know it's up there, but I can't look.
Amy: C-E, C-E makes S sound.
Julie: 'Kay, um, waffles
Amy: Waffles? (*She tries to write this down. Julie leans closer.*)
Julie: /wwwwww-ææææææ/
Julie: Ok, now, Amy, what is your veg, favorite vegetable and fruit?
Amy: Um, apple
Julie: Apple is fruit. Do you like bananas?
Amy: Well, um, sometimes
Julie: They're good for you.
Amy: The yellow ones
Julie: Ok, I'll print banana, okay?
Amy: OK
Julie:/b-b-b-æ-æ-æ-n-n-n-æ-æ-æ -n-n-n-æ-æ-æ/ There's banana.
Amy: Those, those apples makes your teeth, when you teeth is wob, wobb, um, really like moving when you move it, push it. Like when you eat apple, it will fall in, into the apple and you will eat the tooth.
Julie: 'Kay, now you ask me.
Amy: What's your favorite vegetable or fruit? Fruit?
Julie: Mmmm. I like, I like um apple.
(Video-transcript, 4/97)

This conversation does not seem to allow much space for attempts to "play" in the talk. There is some collaboration between the two girls in their helping each other spell the words and in cueing each other about asking the questions; but the conversation could not be described as playful or unaffected by power relations. Although the teacher is not present, the speech acts the girls engage in have been mandated by the teacher, and the worksheet also mediates their activities. Although the customary power relations between the girls are only subtly evident here, it is clear that Julie persuades Amy rather easily that she should choose bananas rather than apples as her favorite fruit and vegetable and that she ignores Amy's conversational gambit about how apples can make you swallow a loose tooth. Despite the children's apparent status equality, and the fact that "mistakes" could not be consequential, the children do not stray far from the task set for them by the teacher, and Amy's attempt to speculate beyond the sheet goes nowhere.

Conclusion

The examination of some classroom practices presented above contributes to understanding questions of access to community expertise. As noted, the practices are in no way unusual in classrooms, and we examine them not to prescribe practices, but to understand more nearly adequately some of their effects.

One of the issues we have been examining with regard to this material is how matters of identity are implicated in access to resources like classroom expertise (including language). Peirce (1995) examines how relations of power are implicated in the opportunities L2 learners have to practice language outside the classroom, arguing that the characteristics of learners are social constructions that are unstable, contradictory, and contextually specific. It appears clear to us that building, maintaining, and protecting one's identity in a setting interacts with how one participates in activity there.

In the situation of the choral repetition of series, poems, and songs, and of the conversations between teachers and children that we describe, children have access to the expertise of their peers as well as the teacher in organizing their performances, and "errors" are regarded as fanciful and ludic and are not obviously consequential. In situations where the identity positions of the children are not obviously threatened and their activities are playful, community knowledge appears accessible to all, and the language of their community appears rich and open to appropriation. In such situations, the children's participation is transformed over the course of time from minimal to full.

However, other situations in classrooms do make differential performance obvious and consequential. In the IRE sequences such as those we describe (and the partner conversations that seemingly get "rekeyed" as

IREs), performances are public and consequential. In several cases in the first cohort of our study we have noted refusal to participate in such sequences or minimal participation in such practices. It may be that these children assess the costs to their identities for error in such settings as being too high.

The Soviet literary theorist Bakhtin (1981) makes a distinction between authoritative and internally persuasive discourse, which may also help us to understand the data we consider here. Authoritative discourse is discourse in which someone assumes a position of authority over other speakers and allows other speakers no opportunity to "play" in the text. In contrast to this kind of discourse, Bakhtin (1981) poses the possibility of "internally persuasive discourse," which is open to the "interanimation" of other voices:

> Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses of our words from within.... The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is not finite, it is open; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal *ever new ways* to mean. (pp. 345-346)

We have been considering the possibility that the speech situations we see in classrooms that seem to ease access to words for the focal children with whom we are concerned are situations where there is play with the borders, and where children can find "ever new ways to mean." When children can find desirable identities in words, when they can play in words, when those words allow them to "answer back," and when the words of their community are open and accessible to them, then we see children transforming their participation.

McDermott (1993) urges us to pay attention to the interactional circumstances "that position the people in the world with a differential access to the common tongue" (p. 283). In the research we present here, we note that particular classroom practices seem to make the classroom resource of English more or less easy of access. Theorizing the variable distribution of the access of children to the words and language activities of their classroom communities as economic practices is helpful in understanding that there is no natural or inevitable necessity to arrangements and that, like instructional practices, classroom economic practices can have profound effects on learning.

Notes

[1]Practices here mean recurring social actions that are "invested with normative expectations and with meanings and significances that go beyond the immediate goals of the action" (Miller & Goodnow, 1995, p. 7).

[2]Transcriptions provided here are broadly represented and are not intended as close transcriptions. We have observed the following conventions:
([) = the point at which two speakers start speaking simultaneously;
(_)=incomprehensible series of words;
(?) = uncertain transcription;
- = sudden cut-off of a sound or word;
upper case letters = increased volume.
IPA transcriptions of certain words are contained between slashes.

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