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Education and language

ABSTRACT: In discussions of language and education, language is usually defined as a shared set of verbal codes, such as English, Spanish, Mandarin, French, and Swahili. But language can also be defined as a generic, communicative phenomenon, especially in descriptions of instruction. Teachers and students use spoken and written language to communicate with each other–to present tasks, engage in learning processes, present academic content, assess learning, display knowledge and skill, and build classroom life. In addition, much of what students learn is language. They learn to read and write (academic written language), and they learn the discourse of academic disciplines (sometimes called academic languages and literacies). Both definitions of language are important to understanding the relationship between language and education.

Keywords: language and education, the relationship, The alternative, language, processes

Learning Language

In their early years, children are learning both spoken and written language. They are developing use of complex grammatical structures and vocabulary; communicative competence (rules for the appropriate and effective use of language in a variety of social situations); comprehension of spoken and written language; and ways to express themselves.

Educational programs for young children often emphasize curriculum and instruction to facilitate language learning. With regard to spoken language, instructional programs may emphasize opportunities to comprehend a variety of genres from directions to narratives and opportunities to experiment with modes of expression. With regard to written language, classrooms for young children provide opportunities to learn alphabetic symbols, grapho-phonemic relationships (letter-sound relationships), basic sight vocabulary, and comprehension strategies; and also feature the reading of stories designed for young children. Young children may also have opportunities to learn how to express themselves through written language, including opportunities to form letters, words, sentences, and text structures, and opportunities to learn how to put together a written story.

There is debate about the extent to which classrooms for young children's language learning should provide didactic, teacher-centered instruction or student-centered instruction. Those who support a didactic approach argue that children whose language performance is below that of their peers need explicit instruction to catch up. These advocates argue that the home and community environments do not provide all children with the experiences needed to be proficient and effective users of language and that direct instruction with grammatical forms, vocabulary, and pronunciation can help certain students catch up with their peers. A similar argument is made for the didactic instruction of written language. Written language, it is argued, is sufficiently different from spoken language as to require explicit instruction. Research noting the importance of phonological awareness to reading development is cited as rationale for a parts (letters and sounds) to whole (fluent oral reading) curriculum.

The alternative argument is that children are inherently *wired* as language learners and that providing them with a stimulating, rich language environment supplies them with the tools they need for further developing their spoken and written language abilities. Although teachers may provide instruction, the instruction should follow the student's needs and interests rather than being prescribed in a predetermined manner. The complexity of language processes requires that children be allowed to engage in complete or whole-

language activities rather than in isolated skill instruction activities that distort language processes by stripping them of their complexity (and also making them harder to learn). The learning of written language is not viewed as being much different from the learning of spoken language, and thus learning processes similar to those used in learning spoken language are advocated for the learning of written language.

In the United States another set of debates surrounds language learning by children whose native language is other than English. First, there are debates with regard to goals. Some educators advocate for a sole emphasis on the learning of English, whereas others advocate for continued language growth in English and in the child's native language. Arguments focus on the role of the public school in providing a common language that can produce national unity. Although few argue against the importance of learning English, questions are raised about whether national unity depends on English only as opposed to English plus additional languages. With regard to the learning of English, one side advocates for an immersion approach that prohibits use of the child's native, first language. Immersion is believed to provide the child with motivation and language input for becoming a fluent English speaker. The other side argues that stripping children of their native language also strips them of their culture and heritage. Further, these advocates point to studies that show that learning English is not inhibited by continued language growth in a native language or by bilingual educational programs. Learning to read in one's native language has been shown by research studies to provide a useful foundation for students learning to read in English.

At the secondary and postsecondary level, students learn the language of a broad range of disciplines. They must learn how to argue in discipline-specific ways and to read and write discipline-specific texts each with their own set of language conventions. Studies have suggested, however, that in some classrooms and schools there is little difference in the texts or written assignments across disciplines. In both science and social studies, for example, students may encounter the same pattern of reading a textbook chapter and answering end-of-chapter questions.

Learning through Language

Learning in classrooms is primarily accomplished through language. Teachers lecture, ask questions, orchestrate discussions, and assign reading and writing tasks. Students engage in academic tasks through reading, writing, exploring the Internet, giving verbal answers to teacher questions, listening to teacher lectures and student presentations, participating in whole-class and instructional peer group discussions, memorizing written text and vocabulary, and so on. A major thrust of classroom research since the 1970s has focused on the following question: What forms of classroom language practice facilitate what kinds of learning?

One classroom language practice of interest to educational researchers has been *scaffolding*. Scaffolding is the process through which teachers and students interact with each other by building on each other's immediately previous statement or utterance. For example, after making a statement, a teacher might ask a student a question intended to help the student elaborate or probe the academic topic a bit further. The student, building on the teacher's question or comment, produces a statement with more depth, complexity, or insight. The teacher might then ask another question to scaffold the learning even further, and so on. Through scaffolding, teachers may be able to help students explore and understand academic issues beyond what they are able to do on their own. Scaffolding can occur between teachers and students and also among students.

Another classroom language practice that has received a great deal of attention from educational researchers has been the teacher initiation—student response—teacher feedback/evaluation sequence (known as I-R-F). It is also referred to as the asking of known-information questions and recitation questioning. Of concern to researchers and educators are the constraints that such a conversational structure places on academic learning. I-R-F sequences rarely provide students with opportunities to provide long or in-depth responses, and the knowledge displayed is contextualized by feedback or evaluation that subsequently

comes from the teacher. I-R-F sequences rarely allow opportunities to explore explanations or to debate issues. The teacher always generates the topics, and thus students do not have opportunities to ask questions. Further, I-R-F sequences provide students with few opportunities to practice the creation of extended spoken text. Research on I-R-F sequences has also shown, however, that they may be more complex and malleable than previously recognized. For example, instead of just providing an evaluation of the correctness of a student response, a teacher might provide additional information and *revoice* a student response in a way that models for students how to phrase the statement in the academic jargon. Such revoicings can be considered a kind of scaffolding. I-R-F sequences may also be useful to display to the whole class what counts as the knowledge for which they are accountable. And I-R-F sequences may also be used by teachers as a classroom management tool, ensuring that students complete assignments and that they are paying attention.

A third classroom language practice that has received a lot of attention has been sharing time (also known as show-and-tell). Sharing time provides an opportunity for young children to develop narrative performance skills such as topic coherence, sequencing of events, structuring narrative events, and adjusting a narrative to an audience. Research shows that how students construct a narrative during sharing time may reflect narrative practices from their own families and communities. In such cases, the narrative produced by the child may differ from the narrative models that a teacher is using to evaluate the child's language performance, and as a result the teacher may negatively evaluate the child. The research on sharing time and similar classroom language practices shows that there is great variation in the narrative models, structures, and devices used across cultures and that children may experiment with many different types of narratives. Children adopt and adapt narrative models from a broad range of sources. In addition to suggesting the need for educators to be sensitive to cultural variation in narrative performance and in assessment of children's language abilities, the studies of sharing time show the close connections among education, language, and cultural variation.

Beyond questions about the effectiveness of various classroom language practices are questions about who is able to engage in what language practices and language processes, when, and where. In other words, what constitutes equitable classroom language practices? Research on turn-taking practices has shown that a broad range of factors influence who gets a turn to talk during classroom conversations and who is less likely to get a turn. These factors may include race, gender, class, native language, and where the student is seated, among others. Some students may get or seek few turns to talk. Those students who do not get or seek turns to talk and who feel alienated from the classroom are sometimes referred to as having been *silenced.* Although students can be silenced by the behavior of the teacher or of other students, more often silencing involves a deeper social process whereby a student is inhibited from bringing into the classroom his culture, language, heritage, community, personal experience, and so on.

Learning about Language

Perhaps the most obvious classroom practice for learning about language is through the study of grammar and spelling. As linguists point out, the grammar taught in school is a prescriptive grammar and is not what linguists mean by grammar (they mean a descriptive grammar). For those students who use Standard American English, prescriptive grammar is often very close to the language they speak. But for students who speak a variation of English other than Standard English or who speak African-American Language (which is also referred to as African-American English, Black Dialect, and Ebonics, among others), the teaching and learning of prescriptive grammar does not necessarily map onto the language they speak, and thus they are learning about a language different from the language they speak.

Another typical classroom practice for learning about language is the instruction of a second language. Learning a second language can mean one of two things: the learning of a foreign language (such as the learning of Latin, French, and Spanish in the United States) or the

learning of English by those in the United States whose native language is not English. It is often the case that the teaching of a second language includes coverage of the grammar, vocabulary structures, and history of the language.

Beyond the teaching of prescriptive grammar and the explicit teaching of a second language, there is very little taught about language in K–12 classrooms. Although there have been experimental and one-off programs in K–12 schools that have taught students the practices of linguists, engaged them in sociolinguistic studies, helped them develop language autobiographies, and sensitized students and teachers to language variation, there exists no broad-based trend.

African-American Language and Classroom Education

The lack of education about language and about language variation may explain, in part, the strong popular reaction to the issue of African-American Language and classroom education. In Ann Arbor, Michigan, and in Oakland, California, the issue of African-American Language and education created controversy. Despite substantial linguistic evidence as to its nature and characteristics, some observers characterized African-American Language as a nonlanguage, as slang, or as sloppy English. As stated by a federal court in Ann Arbor in 1978 (in the case of *King v. Board of Education*), teachers sometimes negatively evaluated students' academic abilities and potential because they spoke African-American Language. The court offered a remedy designed to provide educators with the knowledge they needed to make appropriate assessments of students' academic abilities. In the popular press and in the general public there was a great deal of misunderstanding about the issues involved in the court case, with many mistakenly assuming that recognition of African-American Language as a language was either an attempt to force teachers to teach in African-American Language or an attempt to not teach African-American students to use Standard English effectively.

A similar problem occurred in 1996 when the Oakland School Board created a policy that recognized Ebonics as a language. It was widely assumed by the public that the board was recommending the use of African-American Language as a medium of instruction, and hence was abandoning African-American students to what was assumed to be a second-rate curriculum. Again popular views included mistaken assumptions: that African-American Language was not a language, that the Oakland School Board would not provide instruction in the effective use of Standard English, and that speakers of African-American Language would never be successful in the workplace. Both in the documents on which the resolution was based and in their response to the controversy, however, the Oakland School Board made clear that their resolution was an attempt to focus attention on the educational needs of those students who spoke African-American Language and to provide them with effective instructional programs for reading, writing, academic subjects, and the learning of Standard English. The members of the board pointed out that their resolution was built on established linguistic principles and knowledge and on proven educational practices. In 1997 the Linguistic Society of America passed a resolution supporting the resolution of the Oakland School Board. That resolution pointed out that African-American Language was not slang, sloppy, or incorrect and asserted the importance of the maintenance of what the society termed "vernacular" languages.

The controversy over African-American Language in education points to the complex of relationships among language, education, national politics, and cultural politics. The languages that are spoken in schools, the languages that are taught, the use of language for learning and instruction, are all more than simple matters of pedagogical effectiveness. The definition and use of language and language education in schools are part of broader cultural and political debates about how the nation will be defined and about the structure of power relations among various ethnic, racial, economic, and linguistic groups.

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