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Classroom discourse as a semiotic resource for EFL learning

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SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY (SCT) and social theory of learning see learning as fundamentally social rather than individual, the relationship between the learner and the social world as dialectical rather than dichotomous, and learning as mediated by cultural artifacts (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Classroom discourse studies based on the input-output information processing model have been criticized as predicated on a conduit metaphor of communication and the classroom is seen as a context for providing linguistic input to learners who then process the input and incorporate it into the interlanguage systems inside their heads. This model, a number of scholars have argued, represents an impoverished and a reductionist view of L2 learning (Atkinson, 2002; see Lantolf & Appel,

1994; Lantolf, 2000). This paradigm shift has led to a reconceptualization of language, context, and learning in profound ways. In EFL classrooms, the learners, the teacher, and the context in which learning takes place are dialectically related and they are constitutive of what is being learned.

Within the SCT research paradigm, classroom discourse has been reconceptualized as an important resource that mediates learning in the classroom. In EFL classrooms, classroom discourse is an even more important resource because it is all at once the mediational tool for and the object of learning. Donato (2000) points out that instructional conversations are relevant to language



learning because they capture a wider range of communicative and cognitive functions in pragmatically rich contexts and they socialize students into language learning. In my presentation, I argue that the importance of classroom discourse goes beyond that. Drawing on Halliday's (1978) notion of language as a social semiotic and Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of learning as participation, I argue that EFL classroom discourse is a major semiotic resource for the construal of reality as well as the target language. Halliday (1993) sees learning as a social process and language as social semiotic. He points out that:

When children learn language, they are not simply engaging in one type of learning among many; rather, they are learning the foundations of learning itself. The distinctive characteristic of human learning is that it is a process of making meaning—a semiotic process; and the prototypical form of human semiotic is language. (p. 93)

In other words, when children learn a language, they are construing reality through construing a semantic system in which reality is encoded. Their *acts of meaning* should not be just taken as they are but as “instances of underlying systems—systems of meaning potential” (Halliday, 2004, p. 6, original emphasis). Hence, as an EFL learner learns the target language, he or she is simultaneously construing reality and learning how reality is construed in the target language. On the basis of this, I argue that classroom discourse processes are intersubjective processes in which the construal of reality through a foreign language by each learner shapes and is shaped by the construal of reality and the target language by other learners as well as the teacher with whom they interact as well as all the other resources which mediate the learning process, including the curriculum materials, pedagogical activities, and so on. Seen in this light, the importance of classroom discourse goes beyond capturing a wider variety of speech and cognitive functions: It is an emergent process which opens up a semiotic space that is immensely rich and affords opportunities for learners to appropriate these resources for meaning making as they participate in the construal of reality and the semiotic systems in the target language (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Studies of elementary foreign language classrooms have shown that despite the limited proficiency of the learners in the target language, instructional conversation was as rich a mediating resource as any other (Donato, 2000). In this presentation, data from a research project on learner interaction in primary EFL classrooms in Hong Kong will be used. The data consist of classroom discourse produced by children as they complete a group task of writing a story ending.

In the following section I will present an analysis of some excerpts for illustration. In order to understand the data, I will briefly outline the context of the data.

Context of classroom discourse data

The data was collected from a Grade 6 primary EFL classroom where the children were mostly

from working class families. The teacher adopted a task-based approach to story writing and the task took several lessons to complete. She told the class a story about why there was a change of seasons. The children were given story pictures in sequence, introducing four characters in the story: The Goddess of the Earth; Polly, the Goddess' daughter; the God of the Underworld; and the God of all Gods. The story went as follows:

The God of the Underworld fell in love with Polly. He knew that he could not marry Polly and so he kidnapped her. In the Underworld, Polly did not eat anything because if she did, she could never leave the Underworld. The Goddess of the Earth was very unhappy and stopped taking care of the plants and the plants started to die. People were very unhappy because there was no food and they asked the God of all Gods to help. And so the God of all Gods told the God of the Underworld to send Polly back to Earth. However, when they were talking, Polly ate three strawberries, thinking that nobody could see her. Because of this, after nine months, the God of the Underworld came to take Polly away. And the Goddess of the Earth stopped taking care of the plants again. This is why we have summer and winter.

After telling the story, the teacher introduced a number of guided activities to ensure that learners were familiar with the characters of the story and the sequence of events in the story. She then asked them to write an alternative ending to the story. She also guided the students by asking them to decide first of all whether their story ending was happy or sad.

Classroom discourse and semiotic systems

In this section, I will present one excerpt from a group discussion that will be presented in my keynote presentation. The group decided to write a happy ending and the final draft that they produced is as follows:

The God of the Underworld didn't listen to him. So the God of all Gods made him into a pig. Then Polly went back to the earth. Her mother felt very happy. So they started taking care of the plants again. This is why we have a lot of rice and vegetables to eat.

[Excerpt 1.1]

S1: The end of the story is a happy ending or unhappy?

S3: Happy.
 S2: You want happy?
 S3: I want happy.
 S1: Very happy.
 S2: I want very sad (laughs)... You want very happy?
 S4: Yes.
 S2: And you? (pointing at S4)
 S1: Yes...
 S2: So happy.

In the excerpt we can see that the teacher's instruction to decide on a happy or sad story ending provided the starting point for the collaborative discourse. This scaffolding from the teacher, or *guided participation* (Rogoff, 1990), served the important function of making the task manageable for young EFL learners. Instead of having to work with an open set of choices, they only needed to work on a system of two choices—happy or sad. This generated a decision-making process where all members were asked to indicate their preferences and the majority view was accepted. This selection shaped the subsequent discourse. As Rogoff points out, the process of guided participation is characterized not only by the adult structuring the children's roles and participation, but also children shaping the interaction by seeking involvement and demanding support from the adult and their peers. In the remaining discourse, we can see that a network of semantic systems emerged as each learner tried to establish the intersubjectivity with other participants in the construal of reality.

[Excerpt 1.2]

S3: I want he die.
 S2: I want it too.
 S1: Yes, we can... (verbalizing the first part of the sentence provided in the story) but he didn't listen...
 S2: Yes, he didn't listen... and the God kill him...
 Ss: (correcting S2) The God of all Gods... didn't listen.
 S2: (rebutting) No, didn't listen.
 S3: The God of the Underworld didn't listen to him.
 S1: Yes, yes, Underworld.
 Ss: (spelling out) u-n-d-e-r-w-o-r-l-d.
 S1: Didn't listen... listen to him.
 S3: So...
 S2: So... the God of all Gods.
 S1: The God of all Gods... The God of the... u-n-d-e-r. Underworld...
 S3: (correcting S1) The God of the Underworld you have write already.

Ss: ...
 S1: The God of all Gods.
 S2: Kill him.
 S1: Kill him.
 S2: But I want...
 S3: Yes kill him.

Note. Ss indicates more than one student talking at a time.

In these lines, the choice of a happy ending opened up a semiotic space in which the group explored how the God of the Underworld could no longer have power over Polly so that she could go back to the Earth again. S3 suggested that the God of the Underworld should die and this was agreed to by S2 and S1. S4 was silent and taken as consenting. S2 proffered the idea that the God of all Gods killed him and S1 and S3 concurred. However, we will see from Excerpt 1.3 that this suggestion opened up another system of meaning potential for S1.

[Excerpt 1.3]

S1: Oh no, no, it's not very good. I think the God of all Gods make him into a ghost, uh ... a ghost?
 S3: Uh. (biting her finger, thinking)
 S1: Make him into a ghost.
 Ss: (thinking)
 S3: Uh... make him, make him to be a people.
 S2: Yes, yes, people, and he can't do something to her.
 S1: Oh! I know, I know. Make him into a snake, a dog, or a fish.
 S2: Pig.
 S3: Yes, pig.
 S1: A pig. Cow or pig?
 S2: Cow. (laughs)
 S1: So the God of all Gods make him into a cow... pig... cow...
 S2: Cow or pig?
 S3: Make him to be a cow.
 S1 & S2: Into... into...

Turning the God of the Underworld into a ghost, suggested by S1, is an instance of the system of supernatural beings: A ghost is a lesser supernatural being than a god. The option of keeping the God of the Underworld alive but turning him into a lesser supernatural being opened up for S3 the possibility of denigrating him by turning him into a natural being, that is, a human being. This was immediately taken up by S2 who not only supported this option but also provided

the reason for his support (*he can't do something to her*). This suggests that for S2, the choice of human being was made over ghost in a system of meaning of natural and supernatural beings. The choice of a human being opened up for S1 the further choices of non-human beings, such as snake, dog, or fish which have even less power. The choices of non-human beings proffered by S1 consisted of higher (dog) and lower (snake, fish) living things. The choice of turning the God of the Underworld into a reptile or a fish rather than a dog could have been selected as a more severe form of punishment, if they were construed as choices in a system of order of living thing. Interestingly, S2 suggested *pig* instead. In Chinese culture, pigs carry a negative connotation and are often used as a metaphor for laziness. Cows symbolize hard work and turning a person into a cow means that one has to work hard for the rest of one's life after death and is considered also as a form of punishment. In other words, we see that the choices that were proffered and debated were interpreted as instances in a system of forms of punishment which are culturally rooted.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that the systems of meaning that emerged in the discourse were instantiations of a complex network of meanings which was co-constructed by the learners. The processes of co-construction were shaped by a story that they had heard. The guidance provided by the teacher enabled them to participate in the discourse and negotiate meanings and the linguistic and sociocultural repertoire of each group member. In other words, the learners' participation in the meaning making process shaped and was shaped by the group's collective effort to make sense of a task, the real world as well as the fantastic world of the fairy story. Each contribution from the learner was a strategic move made in the emerging discourse in response to what he or she perceived as meaningful at that particular point in the discourse. It was bound up with learning the culture of that speech community, learning the way the language is used and for what purpose, and learning how to become a full participating member of that speech community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). My presentation will conclude by pointing out that understanding the meaning making processes in which learners are engaged, the cultural tools that mediate these processes, and the appropriation of such tools by learners in the participative process will help us to appreciate the importance of classroom discourse as a semiotic resource for EFL learning.

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