Discourse Contexts for Second Language Development in the Mainstream Classroom

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VOLUME 1

Chapters 1-5

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Certificate

I certify that this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being submitted as part of candidature for any other degree.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me, and that any help that I have received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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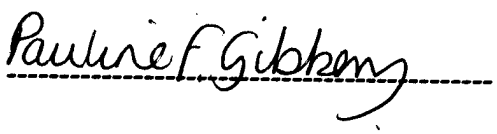

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Abstract

In Australian schools in the late nineties approximately one quarter of all students are from a language background other than English. Although many of these students are fluent in English in informal conversational contexts, there is evidence that such students are not always able to control the more academic registers of English associated with school learning and literacy. A major challenge for teachers is therefore to integrate subject learning with English language learning, and to find ways to support the language development of students concurrent with the construction of curriculum knowledge.

This study addresses that challenge. Drawing on data from two classrooms of nine and ten year olds in the curriculum area of science, the study explores how the discourse of the classroom can be enabling of language development. It does not attempt to make claims about what might be common to all classrooms, but rather points to those practices which are shown to be supportive of second language learning. The aim therefore is not to suggest what is common to all classroom discourse but what its potential can be for second language development. The study takes as a basic principle the notion that language development interacts dynamically with the socio-cultural context in which it occurs, and cannot be fully understood without taking account of this context.

Although the analysis draws on systemic functional linguistics it does not purport to be a study 'in' linguistics, but rather, through a theorisation of practice, seeks to contribute to a theorisation of second language pedagogy in the mainstream classroom. To this end, the analysis is also informed by a neo-Vygotskian approach to learning and teaching, by second language acquisition (SLA) research, and by critically conceived notions of minority education.

A number of conclusions are drawn from the study. First, it shows how, through a process of recontextualisation of student talk, the teachers jointly construct with the students aspects of the science register. It concludes that when teachers encourage the dialogic function of discourse to develop, (that is, when knowledge is seen as co-constructed between teacher and learners, rather than transmitted from teacher to learners), this *also* leads to the kind of teacher-student talk which is most enabling of second language development. The study demonstrates that even apparently minor changes in interactional patterns can have quite major effects on the progress of the discourse as a whole, and can make the difference between

discourse which is likely to constrain or facilitate language development and learning.

The thesis also shows how the discourse incorporates a range of interactional patterns, each of which tend to be used for distinct pedagogical purposes, and thus how the role of the teachers correspondingly changes at different phases of the teaching and learning cycle. The study concludes that a reconceptualisation of pedagogy is required which foregrounds the *relationship* between teaching and learning and the nature of teacher mediation in the teaching and learning process.

The study identifies other significant factors for language development in the classrooms examined: the language knowledge of the teachers, the explicitness of the discourse, (including explicitness about language and about the social aspects of participating in the class), the sequence of teaching and learning activities, and the importance of the intertextual links, the 'dynamic' context, which were the result of this sequence.

Finally, the study points to the value of approaching SLA research and pedagogy with a model of language which goes beyond a description of its phonology, morphology and syntax, one which allows for the study of discourse and for the study of language development in terms of socio-linguistic competence, and for the value of a socio-cultural and classroom-based approach to research into second language learning and pedagogy.

Some notes on style and terminology

The use of pronouns

In writing this thesis I have chosen to use 'I' when expressing a personal viewpoint, rather than using a term such as 'the researcher', which I believe creates an unnecessary distance between reader and writer. Where 'we' is used, its use is intended to indicate reader inclusivity.

Gender inclusive language has been particularly problematic, since, for example, I have frequently needed to refer in a generic sense to 'a child' but have not wanted to use 'he' or 'she' as a generic category, nor the rather clumsy convention 'she/he'. While the use of 'children' would have avoided this problem, this does not always capture the appropriate meaning. I have chosen therefore to use the third person gender neutral terms 'they', 'their', and 'them', as is common in spoken English. My reference in adopting this style is the third edition of the *Macquarie Dictionary* and *The Cambridge Australian English Style Guide* (Peters 1995). Where this usage might be confusing for the reader, (for example if there is another referent to which 'they' could also refer), I have used the more conventional 'she/he', abbreviated to 's/he'. To avoid the same problem, I have referred to teachers as female throughout the thesis, recognising that this is an imperfect solution.

Where 'he' is used within quotations to refer generically to both sexes, I have left the text in its original form, recognising that such usage needs to be interpreted within the conventions of an earlier period. I have chosen not to include the addition of *sic*, since this may risk becoming repetitive for the reader.

Inverted commas

Full quotations are enclosed by double inverted commas, as in the quotation from Edwards and Westgate in the discussion of the notion of discourse below. Single inverted commas are used to signify a particular construct or notion, (as in the example: *the teacher's role is seen as a 'facilitator'*). Where it is a notion associated with a particular writer, for example, Vygotsky's notion of 'inner speech', it is ascribed to them in the first instance and is usually first introduced in the context of a longer quotation.

Notes on Terminology

text

Some linguists (for example, Stubbs 1986) make no theoretical distinction between the terms 'text' and 'discourse'. In Hallidayan grammar (1985) and systemic linguistics generally, a text is defined as a complete semantic unit, whether written or spoken. In this thesis the term 'text' is used rather differently, to refer more specifically to sections of discourse which have been chosen for analysis. It thus refers here to that part of the product or record of the discourse considered relevant to the analysis, and is therefore an artefact of the data presentation itself, rather than a reference to the actual discursive process by means of which that product was generated. A text therefore encapsulates a particular part of the ongoing discourse which has been selected for scrutiny. As such, it should always be read and interpreted as an excerpt from the ongoing discourse, a "significant fragment of the evidence on which the account is based" (Edwards and Westgate 1994, p. 107).

discourse

In this study 'discourse' refers to naturally occurring spoken text. Following Stubbs (1986), the term 'discourse analysis' is preferred over 'text analysis' because of my usage of text as defined above, and because the latter may imply a particular European tradition of text linguistics.

ESL and *minority learners*

There is a tension in a thesis such as this, and in the educational community more broadly, between wishing to avoid the naming of students in simplistic and potentially negative ways, (particularly where the term might suggest notions of deficit[1]), and the need to identify the common characteristic of the kinds of students who are the subject of the study. The term *ESL*, (English as a second language), is commonly used to describe both the field of learning, and the students themselves. I have tried to avoid wherever possible this latter use as a generic label for learners, to avoid the suggestion that 'ESL

[1] The term NESB (non-English speaking background) has for example been widely criticised for apparently naming students only in terms of what they are *not* able to do. More recently in Australia, second language learners have been referred to as LBOTE (language background other than English) students and also as bilingual students. My personal preference is for the use of the latter term, since it foregrounds the fact that students are operating in two language domains, home and school, and thus their linguistic achievements. Since the focus of this study is however specifically the learning of English as a second language, I have chosen not to use this term in the study.

learners' can be viewed as a single group who share personal characteristics, histories, family backgrounds and cultures in common. However, given the topic of the thesis, it is at times necessary within the text to refer to that group of students who share this aspect of school learning. I have preferred, in other instances, to refer to *minority learners*, or *minority language learners*, referring to the fact that these learners speak a first language which is not the dominant language of the school.

outcomes

The term 'outcomes' is increasingly used in Australia and other countries to refer to the means whereby the individual achievements of students are measured and evaluated. Except where indicated, this is not the sense in which it is used in the study, where it refers in its broader sense to the total process of formal education, in terms of the life choices these experiences make possible for students. While there can never be the same, or 'equal', outcomes for all students in any simplistic sense, I make the assumption that education must be concerned with 'equality' of outcomes. That is, there are some things that education should be expected to provide for all students: the means to fully realise individual potential, and the means to participate in society and make informed life choices.

A glossary of linguistic terms used in the thesis can be found at the end of Chapter 3, following the discussion of systemic functional linguistics.