Language and Education

Submitted to:

Prof. Ahmed Mohammed Salih (Ph.D.)

2025 A.D.   1447 A.H.

In its broadest sense, the relationship between language and learning begins long before children go to school. At the same time as they acquire their first language, they are learning how to use it in socially approved ways and they become exposed, through talk, print and the media to the beliefs and values of their community. Children who grow up in a **multilingual** environment also learn at an early age how to draw on their different languages in various ways, depending on the context and who they are talking to. Anthropologists have shown how young children in different communities are being continually socialized through dialogues with parents and others, the talk and stories they hear around them, and the ways in which they learn to engage with different kinds of writing and images in their environment.

At the same time as learning to become an active member of their community through language, children also learn to use it for their own individual purposes: to get other people to do things for them, to express affection or anger and to struggle to make sense of the world around them. Talk is always multifunctional, simultaneously expressing ideas or putting a point of view and conveying some thing about the relationship between the speakers. It also

in some way expresses the speaker's sense of who they are as a person, through the feelings and emotions being expressed, the value position they are taking up, or the language variety they choose to use. When considering the role of language in education, it is important to remember that language in schools and colleges is not only a vehicle for academic teaching and learning, but is also simultaneously involved in expressing or challenging particular kinds of relationships, value positions and identities. In this chapter I look first at the ways in which language has been seen as closely connected with learning in formal educational contexts. I then consider the implications of this for students from different speech communities and mention some of the ways in which sociolinguistic insights have informed educational practice.

Talk and Literacy in The Classroom

Most classroom business, whether to do with teaching the curriculum or managing groups of students, is mediated through dialogue. There tends to be a distinctive pattern of turntaking, referred to as the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) or Initiation–Response–

Evaluation (IRE) sequence

Typically, the teacher initiates the sequence by asking students a question. A student then responds and the teacher evaluates and follows up the response, often also initiating the next sequence. This turn-taking pattern positions the teacher as the speaker with institutional authority who selects and organizes the knowledge to be conveyed to students.

Researchers have shown how knowledge between teachers and students is constructed through these asymmetric dialogues. Whether the discussion is focused on the results of a science experiment, or a poem students have just read, teachers direct students' attention to particular dimensions or features of whatever is under discussion, selectively repeat and reformulate the responses students give to their questions and recapitulate previous classroom discussion. In this way, teachers and students construct a body of shared knowledge about the topic. Through questions, students can be coaxed to consider alternative possibilities, perceive new connections and reach insights in ways which they could not have managed on their own.

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1962) saw language as both a cultural tool, which inducts children into the shared knowledge and

understandings of their society, and also a psychological tool, which extends their learning and development. He argued that dialogue with teachers or more capable peers can stretch children so they are able to extend through what he terms their 'zone of proximal development', that is, the difference between what a child can manage to do independently on its own, and what it is able to achieve when given intellectual guidance and support from others. This support has been termed 'scaffolding' (Bruner 1990), where the teacher does not simply help a learner but provides cues and prompts so that they can find answers for themselves, and can internalize how to do this independently in the future. In other words, scaffolding is about teaching children how to learn (what questions to ask, what features to focus on) as well as how to solve a specific problem.

One of the social dimensions of talk in the classroom which has interested sociolinguists is the relation between language and gender. Research has documented differences and inequalities in girls' and boys' language behaviour, suggesting that boys are competitive rather than collaborative and that they dominate classroom interaction and the use of classroom computers.

Books and other resources tend to be chosen to reflect their interests and activities. Against this, recent trends towards more uses of collaborative talk in the classroom may be seen as a feminization of classroom discourse. The notions of what counts as 'competitive' or 'collaborative' talk have now been problematized, but it is clear that children's motivation to learn, and the ways in which they take part in classroom talk and **literacy** activities, are shaped by their sense of gender (or **social class**, or **ethnic**) identity and the ways in which they feel positioned within classroom discourse.

In addition to learning how to take part in classroom conversations, pupils are also introduced to the technical vocabularies and ways of viewing the world which are connected with specific school subjects. And, right from the beginning of schooling, students are shifted by teachers towards using more literate forms of language. Psychologists like David Olson have argued that the acquisition of literacy is enormously important for children and for society in general, because it leads to more abstract, explicit, rational, scientific thinking. Anthropologists and sociolinguistics, however, have suggested that it is not the acquisition of literacy itself which produces what Olson calls 'a

literate mode of thought', but engagement in particular kinds of literacy practices, and the ways of thinking associated with them.

The anthropologist Brian Street (1984, 1995) argues that the literacy taught in schools is not simply a neutral collection of technical skills, but a particular culturally valued

'essayist' literacy. People learn other kinds of literacies in the other domains of their lives, but these may not be equally valued by educationalists. For instance, a student may produce poor essays at school but demonstrate high levels of IT literacy at home playing video and computer games. He/she is seen as a failure at school but as an expert among friends. As well as involving skills and competences, literacies have social meanings and impact on people's identities. Research with non-traditional students in higher education confirms that academic uses of language and literacy are not neutral skills but can be associated with particular stereotypes and a 'posh academic' identity which some students find alienating, and may not want to acquire. Researchers in the New Literacy Studies who focus on the social and

ideological dimensions of literacy advocate more recognition in the classroom

of students' out-of-school or vernacular literacy practices.

References:

LIamas, C., Mullany, L., & Stockwell, P. (Eds.). (2007). The Routledge Companion to Sociolinguistics. Routledge.