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REPORT:

LANGUAGE DIVERSITY AND CLASSROOM DISCOURSE *

This is a report of a research study undertaken by Ceil Lucas and Denise Borders in the United States, and published in the *American Educational Research Journal*, Spring 1987, Vol.24, No.1, pp.119-141. It is of considerable value to teachers of Aboriginal learners, since so many Aboriginal students are dialect speakers at home and in their communities and may be disadvantaged where no account of that home dialect is taken in the classroom.

In 1977 a suit was filed on behalf of 15 preschool and elementary school children in Ann Arbor, Michigan alleging that the children's home and community language impeded their equal participation in instructional programs and that the school had not taken appropriate action to overcome this language barrier.

The focus of concern was reading instruction, with the claim being made that, if teachers failed to recognise and accept that the children spoke a dialect at home and in peer group settings different from the English required in school settings, it was possible that children could become ashamed of their language and have their learning impeded.

It was emphasised by the plaintiff that the children and the teachers seemed to have no difficulty in understanding each other in the classroom setting. Since there are few research studies investigating communication problems in teacher-child linguistic interaction in the everyday classroom, Lucas and Borders set out to investigate how children and teachers communicate when the children are dialect speakers.

The overall goal of the project was a re-examination of dialect interference through a description and analysis of language functions in elementary school classrooms in which children are dialect speakers. The objective was to widen the focus traditionally placed on language forms to include language functions, that is, to accomplish a variety of classroom tasks.

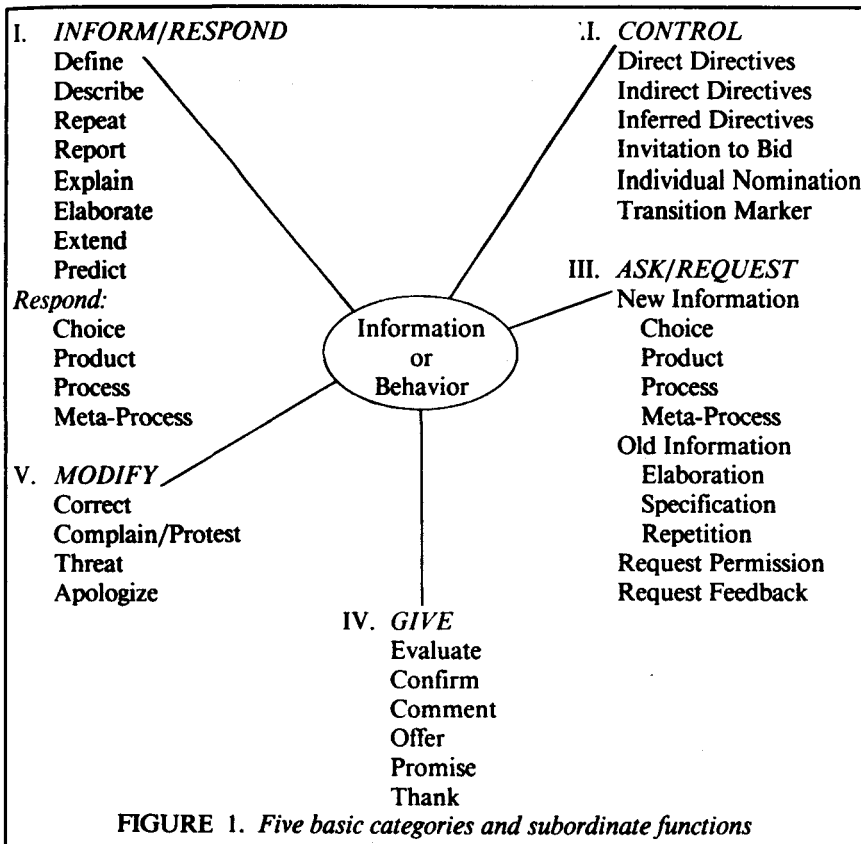
(p.121)

Sixty-two segments of lessons were recorded over a wide variety of activities for a kindergarten, fourth and sixth grade classroom. All children involved were black and spoke dialect at

* Summarised by D.M.Muir

home and in the community. The kindergarten and the fourth grade teachers were black and the sixth grade teacher white. Descriptions of the segments were built up from audiotapes, videotapes and observational data. Whole group activities, small group work (with and without the teacher) and one-to-one interactions were included to give the widest possible range of school activity.

In changing their focus from the form of the classroom language to its function, Lucas and Borders had to find an appropriate classificatory scheme to describe and analyse classroom language. The work of Scollon (1976), Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), Mehan (1979), Montes (1979) and Christian and Tripp (1978) was consulted. The coding scheme developed consists of five large categories of language function with sub-categories for each. As seen in the diagram (Fig.1) participant language functions could be coded into any of the five: (a) inform and respond to, (b) control, (c) ask and request, (d) give, and (e) modify information and behaviour.



Also, within each event, e.g., whole group lesson with teacher, it was possible to isolate four sub-events, "distinguished from each other by language". These four were identified by language that -

1. related specifically to the *event* at hand, e.g., "And what part do you think would help to affect your nervous system?"

2. related to the *management of the event*, e.g., "You're gonna look in the Weekly Reader."

3. and related to *general class management* procedures, e.g., "The children who used lunch tickets may leave their money on my desk."

4. and was unrelated to the event at hand or to classroom procedures - *context comment*, e.g., "It's raining today."

Functions were coded for each speaker and language features achieved with a dialect feature were coded with a +. All 62 segments were transcribed orthographically and coded for occurrence of language features and dialect features. The following is a sample of language in a sixth grade classroom where the teacher is teaching the whole class:-

Teacher: "To be responsible means to be.....?" [Cups her ear] (Request/Product/Initiate/Event)

Student: "In charge." (Product/Response/Event)

Teacher: "You're responsible to whom?" (Request/Product/Initiate/Event)

Student: "Yourself." (Product/Response/Event)

(p.124)

All of the students were interviewed in self-selected groups of three or four, and were asked about the nature of language modification (or correction) in the classroom. All teachers were interviewed individually about language diversity and correction.

Six conclusions were drawn from the detailed analysis of the classroom language.

1. *The participant structure of a given classroom event has an effect on the sheer amount of student talk.* In events with the teacher, teacher talk is far more abundant than student talk

and student talk increasingly through grades four and six becomes restricted to responses to teacher questions or initiations.

2. *The participant structure of a given classroom event has an effect on the occurrence of dialect features and on the occurrence of functions in that event.* A clear picture of the steady development of functional language skills from grade to grade was identified, and the authors suggested that

it is this development of functional language skills and of situationally appropriate language use that precluded the occurrence of interference.

(p.127)

3. *There is developmental progression in the use of dialect from kindergarten through fourth to sixth grade.*

It would appear that the children in kindergarten are still in the process of learning in which situations dialect is appropriate or inappropriate. By fourth and sixth grade, that learning process is practically completed.

(p.131)

As well, there is a progression in learning the "appropriate" language functions from

student initiations and responses in all contexts with a wide range of functions in kindergarten, to a clear separation of initiations and responses and language functions according to setting in the fourth and sixth grades.

(p.132)

4. *An awareness in both the students and the teachers of situationally appropriate language use accompanies the developmental progression in the use of dialect.* By grades four and six, students were very aware of "appropriate" classroom language. This excerpt from one sixth grade interview shows this particularly:-

Interviewer: Do you think some people talk better than others?

M: Yeah.

Interviewer: In what way?

M: Because some people say like, you know, they'll say "I ain't got no more," like that, and some people say, "I haven't any more," like that.

- Interviewer: What is a good talker?
R: A person who speaks real good.
Interviewer: Yeah, but how do you know they're speaking good? What are they doing that's different from a person who doesn't speak good?
G: Use a good *s* sound....
P: They put endings on their words.
L: Like sometime I think M. talk well because everytime I be saying the wrong words, she always correct me.
Interviewer: What do you mean when you say the wrong word?
L: Like I be saying, "M., I ain't got none," like that. She say, "It's not ain't." She say, "You don't have any."

(p.134)

5. Although a wide range of dialect features were noted to occur, only selected ones get modified. This conclusion relates to the modification or correction of dialect features, and Lucas and Borders comment that

The explanation for this observation concerns the linguistic nature of the modified features as opposed to the unmodified ones. The unmodified features included third person singular present *-s* (*she say vs she says*), iterative *be* (*we be playing*), copula deletion (*he home vs. he is home*), plural *-s*, *ain't* as an auxiliary, and existential *it's* (*it's a book on the table vs. there's a book on the table*). All of these are what we might want to call 'active' features, in that they are general features that can apply to a very wide range of items in the language; the *-s* plural can be variably deleted from any noun that takes an *-s* plural; it can be used as an existential in an enormously wide range of linguistic environments; similarly, third person singular present *-s* can be variably deleted on a very large number of past tense verbs. The point is that what unites these features is that they are all rules that apply to large classes of items. The items to which such rules apply are not easily isolable, precisely because of the broad or general nature of the rules. This is in contrast to the features that do get modified, such as *ain't/didn't* substitution (*he ain't do it vs. he didn't do it*) or negative concord with indefinites (*I ain't got none*).

Here the class of items to which the rule applies is noticeably smaller and may be limited, as in the case of *ain't/didn't*, to one item. It is easy to single the item out, and the item itself seems to take on the characteristic of a fixed lexical item as opposed to the object of a general syntactic or phonological rule. Indeed, the isolability and relative singularity of the modified features may be useful in understanding how certain features become socially stereotyped in the first place. We see then, both from observations by the children and the teachers, and from the way dialect diversity is handled, an awareness of situationally appropriate language use.

(pp.135-6)

6. *There was no evidence of dialect interference resulting from dialect diversity, as far as everyday classroom discourse was concerned.* Lucas and Borders claim that their study

demonstrates that although the issue of interference may be fundamentally a language issue, it is clearly not an issue of the production and comprehension of language forms. The production of dialect forms did not impede interaction in the classrooms we studied. To the contrary, our examination of dialect diversity revealed that the children had a fairly sophisticated sociolinguistic competence. Specifically, they clearly demonstrated awareness of a capacity for situationally appropriate language use...Our point here is that the focus should not simply be on *absence* of interference. It should also be on the *presence* of language skills that preclude the possibility of interference. That is, there is no barrier caused by dialect interference because there exists situationally appropriate language use and awareness of dialect diversity in both the teachers and the children. The absence of a barrier is not an accident; rather, it is evidence for sociolinguistic competence in the classroom.

(pp.136-7)

This study, with its extensive use of naturalistic observation, has considered the nature of language function within the classroom when the students are dialect speakers. If failure to develop learning skills cannot be ascribed to dialect interference as Lucas and Borders suggest, then explanations of academic failure

might be sought by re-examining teacher attitude and assessment. As Lucas and Borders argue -

If interaction between teachers' language attitudes and assessment can be demonstrated in experimental situations, it stands to reason that the same interaction may be operative in actual everyday classroom situations, as a function of occurrence of dialect diversity. Simply because 'there was no barrier to understanding caused by the language' does not guarantee that teachers' judgements of student potential and performance are not being affected by attitudes toward dialect diversity.

(p.138)

Also, Lucas and Borders found that there were marked differences in the pictures of child competence presented in teacher-led activity and in activities the children conducted themselves. If teachers based their expectations of children's capability on their observations of children's performance in teacher-led activity then they were grossly underestimating student competence. These findings have great importance for the recognition and incorporation of dialect into the classroom. Lucas and Borders suggest that -

one possible practical application for the findings would be to capitalise on that already-existing functional language competence and use it to develop sociolinguistic skills for a variety of settings. That is, identify the language functions that are already being realized in one language variety and develop them in another language variety.

(p.138)

This study is of value not only for the methodology developed for the recording and coding of naturalistic classroom language functions but for the finding that the dialect-speaking children in this project displayed an unexpected degree of sociolinguistic competence in their classroom functioning, even where there was no deliberate recognition of their dialect and no incorporation of that dialect into the classroom language. The nature of and the way this competence develops could well provide a positive research focus - a focus on what dialect-speaking children can, and do, do rather than on what they can't do.

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