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Author(s)	Robyn Gail Cox
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LISTENING TO CHILDREN: WHAT TEACHERS CAN LEARN

Review by Robyn Gail Cox

INTRODUCTION

The article seeks to bring together some recent theorizing and research findings highlighting the importance of children's talk in school learning. The role of talking in learning is important not only in the early years but also as students progress into the later years of school when more academic demands are made on writing. A corollary to the importance of children's talk in the school learning is the recognition of the value of children's prior knowledge in learning. Teachers need to be constantly alert to the "funds of knowledge" that their students bring to the classroom (Moll, Armanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). They need firstly to be able to recognize this knowledge, and secondly to see it as valid, culturally based and vitally important for bridging the gap between home and community.

By providing opportunities for children to talk in the teaching/learning context, teachers can gain privileged insight into children's prior learning and thus the opportunity to *connect* students to the new knowledge and experiences inherent in the school subject material. Furthermore, the teacher's recognition of the home knowledge of a student or community can provide opportunities for highly motivating curriculum development.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

It is fundamentally important to acknowledge not only home knowledge and its relationship to school knowledge, but also the centrality of student talk in learning. Much student failure and dropout in minority communities the world over is due to the gap between what the students know about the world and how the school portrays their world differently.

Michaels and Sohmer (1995) have argued that teachers must guide, model and scaffold students in schools ways of thinking: by giving explanations, constructing arguments and asking questions that are specific to the "school domain" in question. In order to do this, teachers need to build on students' home-based ways of speaking and reasoning as a bridge to the new ways. Activities that focus on meaning instead of form, that emphasise process over correctness of the product, and make learning meaningful and relevant to children's everyday lives are paramount.

At this point it will be useful to refer to the notion of "intersubjectivity"—that is to say, shared understanding based on a common focus of attention and some presuppositions that form the ground for communication (Rogoff, 1990, p. 71). This intersubjectivity, as Vygotsky (1981)

pointed out, provides the grounds for communication and at the same time supports the extension of the children's understanding. Talking with children provides an obvious starting point for gaining access to their funds of knowledge and thereby becoming better placed to extend their inherent understandings.

Children do not all talk in the same way: talk is shaped by a culture and serves the needs of that culture. A study conducted by Heath (1983) took place in three communities Roadville, Trackton, and a group of townspeople families—and the resultant ethnographies of communication provided details on language-related means by which each community socialised their children. Heath (1983) made three general points, the first of which is relevant to the current discussion and is worth reproducing here:

First, patterns of language used in any community are in accord with and mutually reinforce other cultural patterns, such as space and time orderings, problem-solving techniques, group loyalties, and preferred patterns of recreation (p. 344).

Malcolm's (1995) study of the English of Australian Aboriginal children found that Aboriginal children's speech usually did not proceed in a steady linear progression but was characterised by the use of patterns of repetition, and progression by use of "spurts" of related thought.

Another study highlighting the cultural nature of talk is Labov's seminal work with adult and children users of non-standard dialect. He found that African American students' poor performance in

a language assessment interview was not due to any lack of language ability but rather to the nature of the interview situation. Some interview situations, Labov suggested, have an unequal power balance, and in such a situation a child may use dissembling strategies to avoid saying too much. As Gee (1986) has commented, the work of Labov (1972) puts to rest the belief that there existed restricted and elaborated language codes linked to socio-economic status. What Labov showed was that working-class black youths speak a rule-governed and elegant dialect of English and that their speech has all the qualities generally associated with logical thought (Gee, 1986).

Michaels' (1986) study of "sharing time" took place in a Year 1 classroom where half the students were African American and half non-African American. Michaels argued that the two groups of students had very different ways of sharing information, and showed that a teacher had difficulty collaborating with Deena, a student from an African American background, largely because of their different "talk styles". The teacher's emphasis was on what Michaels subsequently called "topic associated" matters. Deena's talk shifted in focus. She began by talking about what she did on Sunday, "I went to the beach ... Sunday and to McDonalds and to the park..." (p. 108), and then shifted to object-focused discourse about a small purse, then to her birthday, then to playing with her friend. She almost got to say what she set out to talk about—which was how heavy her friend was to carry—when the teacher interrupted with the request: "Tell us what beach you went to" (p. 109)—thereby missing the point of Deena's narrative.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM

Malcolm (1995) uses the term “two-way” education when he talked about Aboriginal English. Malcolm’s work involved developing a teacher education curriculum which supports bidialectalism. Here teacher must accept Aboriginal English, create a bridge to standard English, and cultivate Aboriginal ways of approaching experience and knowledge (Malcolm, 1995).

I would like to suggest a form of *two-way education* where *non-minority* students and teachers might learn to appreciate qualities inherent in traditional experience and knowledge.

There are a number of instances in the literature providing examples of what I have described as “two-way education”. All are based on the principle that “children in households are not passive bystanders as they seem in the classrooms, but active participants in a broad range of activities mediated by these social relationships” (from La Fontaine, 1986—quoted in Moll et al., 1992, p. 134).

A brief review of the literature has revealed three such programs operating in the United States. Each will be briefly described here to provide a starting point for further exploration of two-way education. The first instance was described by Moll et al. (1992), where work with teachers engaged in simple anthropological data collection tasks identified Carlos, a fifth grader, who imported Mexican candy into the United States and sold it to his classmates (the candy was specific to Hispanic border

communities and not available commercially in the United States). The teachers identified Carlos as having a special fund of knowledge about candy taste and ingredients. By working within the community to identify the ingredients, methods and additives (surprisingly, the Mexican candy used none of the artificial colours or flavourings of the US candy), the teachers created a bridge from Carlos’s knowledge to the science curriculum. A Hispanic parent came into the classroom and the teacher and class spent two days making candy, designing wrappers and developing marketing strategies for selling the candy.

A second instance occurred in another Mexican American community (Civil, 1994) where teachers in the project visited the homes of some of their students to uncover their funds of knowledge. They observed household activities, family structure, labor history and learned of the parent’s views on child rearing and schooling. The specific focus of this project was the development of a module on games in a fifth grade class, in order to assist mathematics learning.

A third instance was a “making maths and science relevant” project (Mahoney & Gchachu, 1996) which discussed the use of a child’s home culture as a springboard to learning science and mathematics. It described the implementation in a Zuni Pueblo school of a “Playtime is Science” program in which parents were involved in experiencing how everyday chores are related directly to science.

The use of funds of knowledge in two-way education moves beyond simply recognising and drawing attention to

cultural knowledge. It aims to become sensitive to the cultural knowledge and thereby develop “a culturally sensitive curriculum.” It actually undertakes to bridge the cultural gap and acknowledge the place of cultural knowledge in learning.

DISCUSSION

How teachers can study children's talking

The following discussion reveals how teachers can work systematically towards identifying “funds of knowledge” in children's talk. Two excerpts of teacher/student talk, and analysis of these, illustrate the rich potential of student talk.

In transcript 1 Bonnie, a 7-year-old girl, from the Australian South Sea Islander (ASSI) community in Queensland, Australia, is talking with her teacher. The ASSI people came to Australia from Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands around 1850 as indentured workers to labour in the sugar cane and pastoral industries. The descendents of these workers remain in close-knit communities up and down the east coast of Australia today. In May 1993, following political agitation over many years, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) document, *The Call for Recognition* (HREOC, 1992) called on the Australian government to recognise this group as one of the most disadvantaged minority groups in Australia.

How children and teachers' talk can be at odds

Transcript 1.

I : What else to you do at the beach?

B : Um oh I, I go I climb up to the rock an' I go on the jetty.

I : Run out on the jetty. Do you fish there as well?

B : Yep.

I : Yeah. That sounds neat.

B : An' when I throw myline down I caught thisum toadfish.

I : What do they look like ?

B : ... they are small and they are in the shallow an' they ... got spots on them an' they got big an' they puff themself up to be fat.

I : Oh, neat.

B : An' the big toadfish lives at the sea an' wait my friend he caught a big toadfish 'bout that big (*shows with hands*).

I : Yes.

B : An' my brother he caught a toadfish 'bout that big too (*shows with hands*).

Transcript 1 came from a discussion of the theme, “school holidays”, when the teacher asked about activities at the beach. It can be seen that the Interviewer was seeking global comments about the types of activities that Bonnie was involved in; however, Bonnie wanted to tell about single events, attempting to capture these events. The interviewer persevered to get the descriptions that she expected.

Bonnie wanted to tell a story about one event which happened when visiting the beach but was thwarted in this attempt by a factual question which required a description of a toadfish. Bonnie

persevered and eventually got to tell some “fishing yarns.” Perhaps, as Michaels (1986, p. 101) suggested, although the teacher’s contributions were designed to help develop the talk, they actually restricted Bonnie’s account. Bonnie made some false starts (for example, “Um oh, I, I go, I climb”) during her reply to the interviewer’s questions but these appeared to help frame her talk within the scaffold that the interviewer had provided. This is a common feature in other studies (Heath, 1983; Malcolm, 1995; Michaels, 1986).

How talk can reveal children’s knowledge

Bonnie did get to tell more fishing stories, but it took some resolve on her part to get to the position where she was able to do this and thus establish herself as the narrator. Simple reflection on the subject matter of Bonnie’s talk reveals something of the scientific nature of her knowledge.

Systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1985, 1994) allows text to be analysed for a number of purposes. It was founded on the principle that language is socially constructed, that is to say, it develops to meet the needs of people in particular contexts. The following text has been analysed at the clause level for a number of functions (see Cox, Webb, & McFarlane, 1997). The most relevant function to look at when discussing Bonnie’s talk for the purposes of this paper is the semantic level (or meaning level) in terms of lexical relations—in particular, taxonomic lexical relations. Lexical relations provide a way of systematically describing how words in a text relate to each other, how they cluster to build up

lexical sets or lexical strings. By looking at Bonnie’s answers to the interviewer’s questions about fish we can begin to think analytically about her language choices.

Transcript 2.

I : Tell me about the fish that you caught? Describe the fish.

B : I cau__ I caught a little whiting ‘bout that big (*shows size with hands*) and I caught a bream ‘bout this big (*shows width*).

I : And what do they look like?

B : The bream is spikey and he’s got spikes on the top and he’s got um ... sharp teeth and he’s an’ he an’ he flip, jumps around.

I : And what about the flathead? Tell me about the flathead?

B : When you catch it when you throw the bait ... line in the water an’ you get a bite he um he’ll jump up and he’ll jump up an’ try and get off you line.

I : Yeah?

B : An’ he’ll swim back away.

Figure 1 depicts the taxonomic lexical relations displayed in Bonnie’s talk in *Transcript 2*. It indicates that the lexical items in the text are organised into two relations or categories—the participants in fishing (the people and the fish), and the procedure of how to fish (actions and materials). The lack of detail about time and place suggests that the speaker does not see the need to locate the event in a place or time. Bonnie was intent on describing the appearance and behaviour of the different types of fish—a practice perhaps directly related to scientific enquiry.

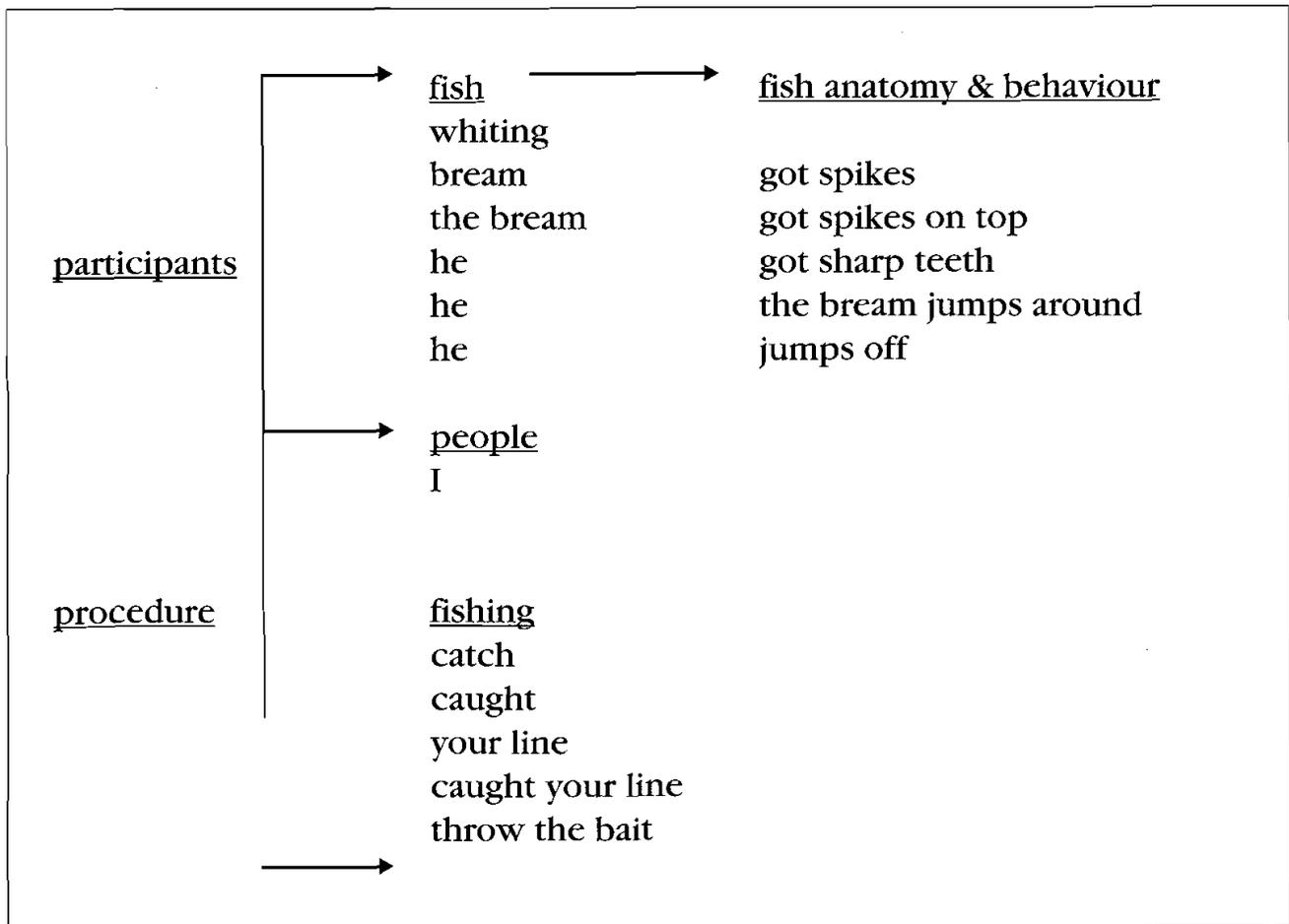


Figure 1. Taxonomic lexical relations of Bonnie's talk in transcript 2.

Bonnie did not seek to tell a story about events (as she had done previously) but replied directly to the interviewer's questions. Her answers detailed the materials and the procedures necessary for engaging in the task of fishing. She also provided detailed knowledge about the physical and behavioural characteristics of bream, whiting and flathead. This writer recognises that the categories of taxonomic relations in this text resemble closely the written procedural text expected of a student who describes an experiment that has been carried out in a science classroom—the expectation is that the text will include descriptions of “procedures,” “findings/results,” and “conclusions.” It could therefore be argued that Bonnie knew the lexical relationships for the development of a written text in a

secondary science classroom, and hence was well prepared to begin work on this type of classroom activity.

SUMMARY

Classrooms need to take serious time to allow students to talk - not in every lesson, and not every child every lesson - but teachers must recognize that talk is an important medium for learning and presenting knowledge. Teachers often use the *tabula rasa* approach, anticipating that students lack everyday logical knowledge about the world - that they come to school as empty vessels. In fact, Bonnie displays not only her content knowledge about fish (biology), but also her apparent ease with the lexical items and lexical taxonomy necessary for the development of a written text.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

- Teachers need to plan for talk in the classroom - not just hope that it will happen.

There are some effective ways to plan for talk. Cummins (1988) describes the 'interactive classroom' as a classroom which is not teacher-centred but where there is scope for genuine dialogue between teacher and students.

- There are many opportunities in the regular teaching program to set up opportunities for talk. Below is a list of ideas adapted from Gibbons (1991).

Describing people and things - known people and things, what something looks like

Narrating - telling a joke, retelling a narrative, recounting a personal experience

Giving an opinion - responding to a news event, a book, a novel

Giving instructions - explaining how something works or is made, how to play a game

Giving an explanation - explaining why something occurs, how it occurs in nature

Presenting an argument - small group discussions, debates

Hypothesizing - What do you think might happen if...

- Listening to student talk is also helpful in determining student readiness for new concepts or new curriculum foci.

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