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Editorial

Applied Linguistics and Education

This special issue of *ial* arrives at a time when language and education are increasingly appearing together on the front page of newspapers. The recent fervor over "Ebonics" in the state of California, and the multiple interpretations of the Oakland school board's policy suggest how politically, interactionally, and sociolinguistically complicated today's classrooms can be. Recognizing the layering of issues involved in educational research, today's classroom researchers necessarily look beyond the statistical demographics of educational failure. To understand the Oakland school board's policy decision, as well as ongoing debate over "bilingual education," researchers must look in detail to both the language practices that go on inside the classroom, and the kinds of language practices students bring with them to the classroom. This twofold attention to contextualized language use both in and out of school is one of the most important contributions applied linguistics can bring to educational research. Working in this area, authors in this volume of *ial* deal with both the minute structuring of language in the classroom, as well as with the linguistic habits and presuppositions students and teachers bring to the classroom from other realms.

As Hugh Mehan illustrated in 1979, classroom talk is interactionally patterned and rule-governed. Since Mehan's seminal work many other analysts of classroom discourse have noticed that school-based knowledge is organized in ways which some students, but not others, can access. Instead of functioning as the leveling device imagined by Dewey (1943), public education more often reproduces social strata of the larger society. In this volume, both of the interviews and two of the articles address the way close attention to discourse in the classroom can illuminate this process. The article by Dennis Lynch and Sharon Hilles illustrates precisely how a teacher's goal to teach apparently neutral "academic skills," is embedded in institutionalized practices so that the classroom simultaneously socializes students into norms, sometimes unpleasant ones, typical of society at large. This article also suggests, however, that there is a potential flexibility in the necessarily scripted classroom practice. This flexibility can lead to either the reproduction or the change of societally scripted roles.

This recognition of the cultural presuppositions behind an apparently neutral curriculum can also be seen in current research in literacy. Recent work in "multiple literacies" (see, for example, Street, 1993, and the chapters within) conceptualize classroom activity as only one among many kinds of literacy, the construction of a particular type of knowledge. Discourse patterns in the classroom can be an important resource for researchers as they identify these multiple literacies.

In this volume, Margaret Field's article examines the language of reading lessons to problematize the kinds of comprehension questions novice readers are expected to answer uniformly. Her analysis suggests that native Spanish speakers have difficulty when asked to make inferences about the thoughts or feelings of characters in a text. By looking closely at classroom discourse to investigate the different *kinds* of knowledge in play, Field's article deconstructs the notion of one "neutral" understanding of even an elementary school reader. Similarly, Vai Ramanathan and Robert Kaplan's article, through the analysis of several composition textbooks, questions the generalizability of writing teaching techniques, specifically the concept of "critical thinking skills" as applied to non-native speakers of English. Ramanathan and Kaplan illustrate that this construct is not a neutral one, and not easily extended across different languages/cultures.

The concept of "multiple literacies", while focussing researchers closely on discourse within the classroom, has also led researchers to look outside the classroom in order to understand the origins of demographic variability in scholastic achievement. Since Susan Philips' work on Native American and school-based regulation of time (1974), and Shirley Brice Heath's research on home and school narrative styles (1984), more classroom researchers have begun to look at cross-cultural differences between home and school discourse patterns in order to arrive at greater educational efficacy in classrooms. Moll and Diaz (1987) and Gonzalez et al. (1995) have not looked as closely at discourse patterns, but they have suggested more generally that "funds of knowledge" brought from home must be integrated into the classroom if schools are to provide equal educational opportunity.

Fewer studies, however, have explored the diverse "funds of knowledge" that *teachers* bring to the classroom—the kinds of assumptions socialized through the language of teacher training. Myriam Torres' article in this volume investigates the discourse of practicing teachers in a masters degree program, to see how their "group voices" are created. Her article has important implications for those interested in the relationship between theory and practice, and the manner in which teachers function simultaneously as practitioners and as intellectuals with sociopolitical interests. Liying Cheng's article also looks at teachers' knowledge, and uses their feedback to add validity to her statistical findings about the relevance of reading instruction in an ESL training program for graduate students.

The role of the teacher as theorist and practitioner, and the issues of situated literacy are taken up again in the two interviews in this volume. In her interview with David Olsher, Deborah Poole states that, though trained as a researcher, her goals as an applied linguist are educational. By looking specifically at language, her work highlights the types of misunderstandings that continually occur in today's classrooms, and looks to possible solutions through discourse analysis. Kris Gutierrez, in an interview with Myrna Gwen Turner, also discusses her work as a classroom researcher and how her own life history as a bilingual Latina has shaped her views on literacy and culture in the classroom. Her insights shed light on some

of the same issues posed by Field's research in bilingual classrooms (this volume). Both Poole and Gutierrez stress the important relationship between theory and practice, and are inspiring examples of the value of discourse analysis in the classroom.

The necessarily situated study of language is also taken up in the book reviews in this volume. In particular, David Nordlund's review essay critiques Pinker's (1994) book *The Language Instinct*. Nordlund takes a sociocultural perspective, arguing that *The Language Instinct*, though clearly a brilliant book, does not describe a language instinct at all, but a grammar instinct, and ignores the socializing forces behind language use. *ial* welcomes commentary on this review and we look forward to carrying ongoing dialogue on this topic. Olga Solomon's review of Dell Hymes' *Ethnography, Linguistics, Narrative Inequality* also addresses the way language and sociopolitical realities shape one another, and Hirohide Mori's review of *Input and Interaction in Language Acquisition*, a collection edited by Clare Gallaway and Brian J. Richards, suggests that even traditional work in language acquisition is beginning to take a more situated and process oriented perspective.

While none of the work in this volume addresses the topics of bilingual education or "Ebonics" *per se*, the articles before you, like a great deal of the current work in applied linguistics, illustrate the collective development of a conceptual apparatus to deal with such issues. We are used to reading reports on test scores in the daily papers, or even lamenting editorials over rising dropout rates or the unjust demographics of school failure. But the circular nature of editorial commentary on these issues suggests that even these debates are more rhetorical than practical. As evidenced by the Ebonics controversy, there is a general recognition of the importance of applied linguistic research in the classroom, but a confusion as to how language practices relate to improved education. Applied linguists certainly cannot resolve the debate over the proper role of Ebonics in the schools, but by looking closely at language in the classroom and out, the applied linguist can begin to reach a more nuanced understanding of the issue. This edition of *ial*, devoted to language and schools, gives a sampling of the kinds of issues applied linguists working in education can effectively investigate.

December 1996

Betsy Rymes

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