Classroom Discourse Routines: Changing the Rules

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Students in our schools today represent a wide diversity of linguistic and cultural groups at different levels of proficiency in their literacy development, creating achievement ranges that are difficult for teachers to accommodate within existing classroom language routines. New research suggests a need for change in the forms of pedagogic verbal interaction that drive classroom instructional activities; however, the nature of the modifications in language routines for students with cultural or linguistic differences is not as clearly documented. The purpose of this article is to address the issue of expanding classroom discourse routines beyond the traditional, covert rules of most classrooms and to examine the roles that teachers—in this case, preservice teachers—play in creating those changes.

Theoretical Framework

The first area of research that informs this line of study focuses on the nature of classroom discourse and the important role it serves in teaching and learning in the schools. Within reading activities in classroom settings, pedagogic language routines take specific forms (Bernstein, 1990; Cazden, 1988; Wells, 1999). Students' learning in the classroom is tied to these language routines that are set by the teacher and used by peers to question and respond to new information (Lemke, 1985; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Gutierrez (1995) argues that these instructional language patterns provide a context that influences learning and literacy development. Specifically, language routines impact upon students’ opportunities for
clarification and repair of misunderstandings (Pennington, 1998), and shapes students’ understandings and thinking processes (Wells, 1999). Teachers use students’ verbal responses to questions and comments for evaluative purposes. Thus, language is the medium of education (e.g., Lemke, 1985; Nystrand, Gamaron, Kacher, & Prendergast, 1997).

The second area of research that situates this study of language routines in schools draws from observations of the varying language needs of diverse student populations as they affect the form and function of classroom discourse. Areas of language diversity may be considered in four groups: cultural/linguistic differences, dialectical variations, borderline learning problems, and variations in communication styles. Cultural differences may appear as variations in classroom members’ question-answer response patterns from the traditional initiation-response-evaluation format (Au, 1993; Davidman & Davidman, 2001), literacy experiences and background knowledge different from mainstream vocabulary and lexicon (Heath, 1983), and home experiences or parental expectations that shape students’ organization of knowledge (Goldenberg, 1994). Linguistic differences include confusions and miscues in sound-symbol associations and vocabulary, including bilingual and deaf students (Gunning, 2000) and dialectical variations in language (Goodman & Buck, 1973; Seymour, Bland-Stewart, & Green, 1998). Specific learning problems, such as in reading, language, and/or attentional problems create difficulties in organization of language within traditional discourse patterns (Silliman & Wilkinson, 2000). Communication disorders, such as dysfluency, word retrieval difficulties, or speech misarticulations may disrupt teacher-directed language exchanges between a student and the teacher or peers (German & Simon, 1991). Lastly, cognitive giftedness and challenges, including students with special talents and slow
learners, require different approaches to literacy instruction through language exchanges (Gardner, 1983).

A third line of academic investigation that is re-gaining attention in the form of new classroom and case studies surrounds changes in the characteristics patterns of pedagogic discourse. The predominant and persistent form of classroom discourse remains one of teacher initiation, student response, and teacher evaluation (Nystrand et al., 1997). Researchers have argued for more expansive forms of interaction that derive from students’ inquiry and experience (Pappas, 1997; Wells, 1999) and reflect shared authority in the classroom (Nystrand, Gamaron, Kacher, & Prendergast, 1997; Oyler, 1996), because children who are unable to participate in these restricted verbal interactions will be at a distinct disadvantage in the classroom activities and, in many cases, may lag in achievement levels (Silliman & Wilkinson, 2000). The premise that language and literacy learning are socially constructed processes (Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Wells, 1986; Wertsch, 1985) suggests that all children's language strategies be acknowledged and addressed in the classroom as they attempt to cope with the interactional challenges of various daily routines (Falk-Ross, 2000; Gutierrez, 1995). Expansions in language routines for literacy activities suggested by these researchers include use of: dialogic conversations, scaffolded instruction, student-negotiated development of meaning, increased interactive opportunities, question uptake, and high level evaluative response forms.

Implication of these research findings focused on the need for implementation of relevant expansions in language routines. Thus, changes in language routines served as the goal for preservice teachers’ verbal interactions with students in their classes. The questions that drove their inquiries were: How can these expanded language routines be integrated into
existing literacy activities? What changes in students’ participation are created by these modifications in discourse patterns? Responses to these inquiries in the form of qualitative descriptions of changes in the nature and amount of student participation during literacy instruction would further inform other literacy educators.

**Methodology**

The study was situated in a suburban elementary school district, encompassing two elementary schools and one middle school. The school district was part of an evolving school-university partnership, including practicum placements for preservice students such as this study required. The student population of the schools was fairly diverse, composed of children in regular education classrooms having varied cultural, linguistic, and special needs backgrounds. For reading instruction, the cooperating classroom teachers used a basal series combined with occasional literature-based and thematic units. The preservice teachers were paired in classrooms to complete all phases of the study in a one-month period of time. This was their first teaching practicum experience.

**Participants and Procedures**

Fifty preservice teachers enrolled in an undergraduate reading methods course within a midwest university’s Teacher Education Program received a 3-hour workshop-format presentation detailing theoretical perspectives and practical applications of variations in classroom discourse routines within literacy activities. Following two weeks of reflection and planning, they began an assigned three-stage action project involving the study of classroom language routines, i.e., consisting of a week each of participant observation, development of modification suggestions, and new language routine implementation. Each week consisted of part-time classroom experience, during which the preservice teachers were expected to
implement the specific focal activities (i.e., observation, hypothesized suggestions, new language routine implementation), as well as other assignments. Specifics of each portion of the study follow.

**Observations of discourse routines.** In order to gain a deeper awareness and understanding of the nature of classroom discourse, preservice teachers were asked to collect participant observation notes describing variables in student-teacher and student-peer interactions. Observations of teacher initiatives were focused on their levels of questions (i.e., literal, inferential, or critical), the frequency of teacher-led questions, the nature of evaluative remarks, and the perspective (i.e., naïve/non-naïve) that was taken by the teacher. Student initiatives were considered for the types of responses, frequency of questions, and general topics of questions. Student-student interaction was focused on the frequency of occurrence of exchanges and the context of interaction, e.g., in small groups, at play (or lunch, recess), or within whole class discourse.

**Suggestions for modifications in observed discourse formats.** The preservice teachers were first required to consider and generate new language routines to expand those that they observed in the classroom among teachers and students as a practice prior to the next stage in the study, i.e., implementation of new routines in their own interactions with students. The written suggestions were provided for discussion among the members of the reading methods class only, i.e., not distributed to the cooperating teachers. The suggested changes needed to be changes in the cooperating teacher’s language that would be specifically supportive and responsive to one student’s need for language modification or to a group of students’ line of questioning. For example, if the cooperating teacher was observed to ask a student, “Who was the first President of the United States?” which requires a one or two-word
literal response from one student, the preservice teacher might provide a written suggestion that s/he ask instead, “Who can tell me about the first President of the United States?” or, “Tell me what you know about the first President,” directed to a group of students or the whole class. These reformulations required longer response statements and more information provided by each of several students. The new suggestions were intended to allow all students, including marginalized class members, to be successful in providing some information, not just that one word or idea, i.e., a ‘psycholinguistic guess’, that would match the teacher’s expectation.

**New routine implementation.** Consistent with the stages of an inquiry approach, i.e., observation, reflection/hypothesis (or suggestions), and action, the preservice teachers submitted short anecdotes detailing the nature of five instances of their own in-class implementation of discourse routine expansions and the context, or literacy activity, in which the new routines were introduced. The emphasis of the implemented activity was on the development of new, more inclusive language expansions. Each preservice teacher noted general observations of the changes in the nature of students’ responses and participation following use of the modified discourse patterns. In many instances, the preservice teachers implemented, when possible, the same suggestions that they offered earlier in the study, or developed other appropriate patterns that would elicit more evaluative, critical, and extended (i.e., longer) student responses. For example, if a preservice teacher had been asking questions that required literal, one-word answers, he or she would open, or expand, the format to a include higher level of questions requiring students’ own experiences and opinions. Representative examples of the new routine implementation are explained in more detail in the next section.
Data Sources and Analysis

The study consisted of qualitative descriptions of pedagogic discourse during reading instruction. Data sources for this study consisted of students’ observational field notes, observation checklists and note sheets, preservice teachers’ written accounts of changes in language routines, and the university supervisor’s reports. Language production by preservice teachers and students was categorized by episodes that began with a question and ended with a set of student responses to that question. The data were collected and analyzed qualitatively using a constant comparative method of determining major patterns of preservice teachers’ responses (Glaser & Strauss, 1987). Response patterns were clustered by type and reviewed repeatedly throughout the study to locate discrepancies and to refine coding. This variety of complementary data sources provided triangulation of data for effectively presenting research results.

Patterns in Preservice Teachers’ Changes in Language Routines

The preservice teachers each chose five different instances within literacy activities to develop and use modification(s) in the language routine within classroom discourse. These matched or were similar to those presented from a research presentation, class explanation, or group discussions of the appropriateness of the previously suggested changes. Coding of their new language routines indicated that the preservice teachers focused on eight areas of change: requesting elaboration, eliciting student initiations, individualizing comments, providing positive evaluations, increasing wait time, asking higher order questions, and assigning peer interactions. Transcriptions of their comments illustrate the changes each preservice teacher made in discourse and the empowered attitude that each seemed to assume in their reflection.
Requesting Elaboration

“[I tried] Asking why the student used this answer. I used this more [often] to find how they arrived at their answer.”

“I would ask them for their reasoning in their own words.”

“I tried to open up my classroom to interactive opportunities...let the children talk about each other’s ideas.”

“I attempted to ‘act dumb’ and then suddenly understand.”

Recognizing and Encouraging Student Initiations

“[I said,] That’s a great question. Any others?”

“When one student didn’t understand, I had a few students raise their hands and explain the directions step-by-step. It was [then] easier to understand.”

“During this [reading out loud] time, I would also let the children ask me questions about the story.”

Individual Conferencing

“ I worked with a student who struggles with language arts. I asked her literal and inferential questions, guiding her through the assignment.”

“One student needed a little extra attention, so I talked to him before class. I just…made conversation with him.”

“I want to do it more [frequently].”

Providing Positive Evaluations of Language

“I found that the children had better responses if I told them, ‘Good sport,’ when they answered incorrectly.”
“In the area of self-esteem….I let them know that it is okay to not understand something.

“I asked for their opinions-this let them know that their thoughts were important. It kept their interest up.”

“I tried to call on different students-even those I knew may not provide the correct answer. I coached and guided them…and tried to give positive feedback to any student who contributed.”

“Get all the students involved…cannot have the same handful of students answering all the time.”

“The students’ names were chosen from a jar.”

Allow Extended Wait Time

“Whenever I asked a question … I would count to five in my head. This was my way of letting each student have enough time to answer before I called on someone else (which wasn’t easy to do when I was in a rush).”

“I really wanted the students to think about a question not just to regurgitate it.”

“I allowed more time after asking questions so they could respond successfully.”

Increasing Peers/Pairs Assignments

“I organized more small group cooperative work in the class.”

“I tried to have the children work in groups. The peer interaction helped students teach each other.”

“We gave the pair [of students] a worksheet to and they were to move anywhere in the room. It was amazing to see the students teach one another what they could not normally understand.”
Asking Higher Order Questions

“I wanted them to broaden their thinking.”

“I asked more critical questions…allow the students to use their minds and imagination.”

“Another interaction I was cognitive of was asking them, ‘Why?’”

“A question that was more appropriate was, ‘If you were Jane in this story, what would you do if someone stole your bike?’”

“I also got in the habit of asking a question and when I received an answer, I would ask other students to add to that answer.”

“After a student answers, attempt to get responses from other students, as well.” “this may clarify misconceptions.”

Results of Changes in Language Routines

Changes were documented in the preservice teachers’ understanding of the pivotal role of teacher-student language routines in supporting literacy activities as well as the general changes that occurred in students’ responses as a result of modifications in these exchanges. Preservice teachers discussed the increase in the quantity and quality of marginalized students’ verbal participation in literacy activities, and acknowledged the difficulty they experienced as they attempted to vary their teacher-student interaction due to models and experiences they have followed.

Further analysis of data revealed relationships between expanded forms of teacher-student language routines and participation in reading activities for students with cultural or linguistic differences. Changes in the form of expansions in language routines indicated an increase in the quantity and quality of language participation in literacy activities, in students’
engagement and attentiveness during literacy instruction, and in more independent use of reading strategies in the classroom. For example, more than one third of the preservice teachers reported students’ increased retention of information/strategies following class lessons and more independent use and initiation of language constructions (i.e., questions and comments) by students. More than one half of the preservice teachers documented an increase in risk-taking by marginalized students and communicated that they perceived their modifications to assist them in more accurately identifying the children’s literacy needs. All but three perservice teachers noted in their observations that their students were better listeners, i.e., they were more attentive and responsive to peers’ contributions to classroom conversations than during more traditional, initiation-response-evaluation (IRE, Cazden, 1988), formats.

In addition, the preservice teachers’ notes and discussions revealed secondary changes in literacy instruction as occurring. These were not as clearly documented but are implications for future research and academic conversations. These secondary observations included changes in materials used for literacy instruction, such as fewer worksheets, and development of an increased number of projects reflecting student choice.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study revealed several positive advantages to changing the traditional, unstated rules for instructional language routines during literacy activities. In fact, all of the preservice teachers in this study described the expansions in language routines to be motivational for students’ discourse participation and supportive of educators’ facilitative actions. It is important to note that although the preservice teachers were encouraged to note the positive and negative observations with regard to students’ responses, they each found
their own experiences to bring them closer to the middle of conversations, rather than on the
edge in a teacher-directed role. They did not have a great deal of experience with which to
compare these new findings, but were able to judge the consequences of the language
expansions in practical ways that may help them with guiding students’ literacy and learning
development and will inform teacher educators.

The preservice teachers’ descriptions of changes in students’ discourse participation
were of a qualitative nature. They were experimenting with modifications in language
routines, a topic that has gained importance in teaching methods now that school populations
are more diverse than in the past. Due to the nature of the preservice teachers’ responsibilities
in the classrooms, i.e., complementary to that of the cooperating teachers, they were not able
to control or reliably measure all forms of pre- or teacher questions or the amount of student
participation. A more focused and controlled study of student engagement in pedagogic
discourse, perhaps with student teachers or practicing graduate students, is suggested for more
specific, measurable changes.

This project was a difficult one for preservice teachers, as it would be for practicing
teachers, due to the heightened level of metacommunicative awareness that was required to
change their predominantly traditional language patterns during literacy lessons. These
changes in questioning and interactive patterns occurred as they were gaining their second
semester of teaching experiences. However, the importance of learning early in the teacher
preparation process the necessity of observing, suggesting, and then integrating new expanded
patterns of discourse routines became obvious as they completed the project and reflective
discussions ensued. That is, the higher level of discourse approached that of more authentic
conversations and the inclusive nature of the language was a draw for marginalized students.
An incidental finding was that preservice teachers began to discuss the need for modifications in teacher-specialist collaborations, which is an important move for all educators and has implications for future research. The movement from observation, to modification plans, and the implementation of changes in language routines, i.e., this modified action research approach, builds onto the research work focusing on preservice teachers’ need for reflection on practice and leads the way for more equitable, meaningful literacy education.

References


