

CHILDREN'S AND TEACHER'S DISCOURSE IN THE CLASSROOM: SAME OR DIFFERENT?

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While investigating interactional situations in classrooms, it came to my attention that children participate in them with utterances extracted from their teachers' discourse. In fact, teachers frequently make children take part in their own discourse by introducing them into it. They have two main strategies to achieve this: one consists of leaving blanks for the children to fill in, as in episode 1¹:

Episode 1 (Kindergarten. The teacher had read the children a story the previous day, and is now checking if they remember it. Children are sitting on a carpet around the teacher.)

M: Entonces el patito feo se sintió solo y se va al ...
So the duckling felt alone and went to the ...

Niños: bosque
forest

M: Bosque. ¿Y cómo se siente?
Forest. And how is he feeling?

Niños: Triste.
Sad.

M: Triste, muy bien.
Sad, very well.

¹ Transcription conventions

A: alumno (pupil)

A1: alumno identificado (identified pupil)

Niños: children

M: maestra (school teacher)

P: profesor (highschool teacher)

[+xxx habla simultánea (simultaneous speech)

[+xxx

The other strategy consists of repairing the child's utterance by repeating it with a different choice of vocabulary. In the following example, the child uses a non-standard word widely used in his area to name a grocery store, and the teacher continues with the same topic supplying a standard equivalent in its place.

Episode 2 (1st. grade, talking about their helping at home)

A: Vamos al boliche.

We go to the "store".

M: Ah, muy bien, y ¿ a qué van al almacén?

Oh, that's good, and what do you go to the store for?

On the other hand, teachers tend most often to accept as "right answers" to their questions those which show a high degree of similarity with their previous expressions. Accordingly, they tend either to reject or to ignore children's answers which would differ from their own way of putting into words the topic in question.

Episode 3 (1st. grade, talking about pears. The previous day they had observed, cut, tasted, and talked about pears. They also learned a riddle about this. Now the teacher is checking what they remember.)

M: Y ustedes recuerdan que observamos ...

And you remember we observed...

A: la pera.

the pear

M: Observamos la pera y vimos. ¿ Cómo es la pera? Levanten la mano.

We observed the pear and we saw. What's the pear like?

Raise your hands.

A: Amarilla por fuera.

Yellow outside.

M: Muy bien. ¿ Y qué más vimos?

Very good. And what else did we see?

(...)

M: ¿ Qué sabor tiene la pera

How does the pear taste?

A: Rico.

Delicious.

M: Dulce, amargo, salado. ¿ Cómo es?

Sweet, bitter, salty. What is it like?

Niños: Dulce.

Sweet.

M: Pero es dulce porque esa pera ¿cómo estaba?

But it is sweet because, how was that pear?

A1: Buena.

Good.

A2: Estaba muy rica, maestra.

It was good, teacher.

M: ¿ Cómo estaba esa pera?

How was that pear.

Niños: Rica. *Delicious.*

Buena. *Good.*

M: Pero ¿ cómo estaba?

But, how was it?

A: Ri-ca.

De-li-cious.

M: Sí, estaba rica. Estaba verde, madura ¿ cómo estaba?

Yes, it was delicious. Was it unripe (green), ripe, how was it?

A1: Amarilla.

Yellow.

A2: Madura.

Ripe.

In this example, when talking about the appearance of pears the teacher accepts the answer “amarilla por fuera” which is part of the riddle they had learned. Later on, when she wants the children to say “verde” or “madura” (unripe or ripe), a child confuses the two meanings of the word “verde” (green and unripe), and uses it as referring to the color. The teacher doesn’t seem to realize this fact (at least, she doesn’t correct the child or explain anything). At the same time she ignores the answer “rica” (delicious) because it isn’t what she is looking for, even though it is quite an appropriate answer to what seemed to be an open question. In the following example, we can see an instance of a teacher ignoring a very personal and interesting comment of a child.

Episode 4 (Kindergarten. The teacher had read the children a story the previous day, and is now checking if they remember it. Children are sitting on a carpet around the teacher.)

M: Pero era un ...

But it was a ...

Niños: cisne.

swan.

M: Cisne, muy bien. Por eso nació diferente, porque era un cisne.

Swan, very good. That’s why he was born different, because he was a swan.

A: Yo nací diferente que mi hermano.

I was born different from my brother.

M: Ahora vamos a dibujar lo que más les gustó del cuento.

Now we’re going to draw what you liked the most about the story.

Here the teacher ignores a comment that relates the story to the personal experience of the child and which, if the teacher had taken it into consideration, could have changed the rest of the lesson.

We can find examples of this kind even when children are asked either a so-called “open question” or their personal opinion about some point in discussion. And we can find exactly the same situations in highschools, with pupils about 17 years old, as in the following episode.

Episode 5 (5th grade, secondary school, philosophy)

P: Bien, ahora les hago la siguiente pregunta ¿quién de ustedes cree que se puede llegar al conocimiento de todas las cosas? Levanten la mano para contestar.

OK, now I ask you the following question: which one of you believes that it's possible to get to the knowledge of all things? Raise your hands in order to answer.

A1: Los escépticos dicen que no se puede.

Skeptics say it isn't possible.

A2: Yo pienso que...

I think that ...

P: Bien ¿qué significa el término “escéptico” en filosofía?

OK, what does the term “skeptic” mean in philosophy?

In such situations teachers seem to hear only what resembles their own discourse. Here, even though the teacher had apparently asked for a personal opinion, he picked up the term “skeptics”, which belongs to his discourse, from a pupil's answer, and ignored the pupil who wanted to give his opinion.

But there are other situations where children introduce utterances in a non-conventional way, that is, they use parts of the teacher's discourse in combinations that surprise even the teacher. It is possible to analyse the emergence of the teacher's discourse as taken up by the child as frozen discourse. As long as the discourse remains frozen it will be under control; it will seem “normal”, but at some point it may appear in a non conventional way. We can see this in the following episode:

Episode 6 (6th grade. Teacher and children are talking about their visit to the Congress House. Firstly, the children describe what they have seen and then the teacher asks them questions about their opinions and feelings)

A1: Nosotros concurrimos al Palacio Legislativo para visitar una reliquia arquitectónica y la sede de nuestro gobierno.

We went to the Legislative Palace in order to visit an architectural relic and the see of our government.

M: ¿Qué sentiste cuando entraste en el Salón de Fiestas?

What did you feel when you got into the Ball Room?

A2: Sentí una emoción al ver que tenía cielorraso y placas de oro.
I felt an emotion to see that it had ceiling and plaques of gold.

M: ¿Sentiste emoción?
You felt an emotion?

A2: Una impresión sentí.
An impression, I got.

A3: Muchos deseos de ser eso mío porque era muy valioso.
Many wishes to own that, because it was very valuable.

M: ¿Y de quién es?
And who owns it?

Niños: Del pueblo.
The people.

M: (dirigiéndose a A3) ¿Y no lo sentís tuyo?
And don't you feel it's yours?

Niños: Yo sí.
I do.

A1, in the first turn, makes use of vocabulary obviously taken from the teacher's previous explanations and the leaflets they had read. The teacher accepts his contribution without any comment, and everything seems under control. But when A2 answers the question about his feelings by expressing the emotion to see the ceiling and plaques of gold, the teacher can't understand and tries to verify whether the child really meant "emotion". While A2 tries to define his feeling without luck, A3 gives a personal view: he would like to be the owner of all those valuable things. This wish doesn't agree with the ideas the teacher had been trying to expose the children to, namely that the Congress House belongs to the people. Therefore, she immediately checks if the rest of the group had got this idea, and the children chorus the answer she expects.

What can we infer from these examples? Are teachers and children sharing the same discourse (that is, the same frame of reference, the same meanings) or are the children repeating frozen fragments that aren't under their control yet? Most researchers would probably accept the second possibility instead of the first one. But it wouldn't be so easy to agree on the explanation of what this fact means, since the different possible explanations are dependent on theoretical decisions concerning the nature of language and interaction. As Tannen (1989: 46) points out, "(...) repetition is at the heart of language (...) it raises fundamental questions about the nature of language, and the degree to which language is freely "generated" or repeated from language previously experienced". This author claims that repetition serves to create interpersonal involvement by facilitating production, comprehension, connection, and interaction in different ways. "Repeating the words, phrases, or sentences of other

speakers (a) accomplishes a conversation, (b) shows one's response to another's utterance, (c) shows acceptance of others' utterances, their participation, and them, and (d) gives evidence of one's own participation" (Tannen, 1989: 52).

But interaction might also be defined through the notion of control (see for example Wiemann, 1985) and classroom situations fit very well such a definition. The structure and content of interactions impose strict limits on both the options available to participants and the systemic relations those options are part of. Within such a framework, the teacher's discourse present in the child's utterances might be explained as one of the effects of the controlled situation, i. e., as indicating the children's acceptance of the role that has been signalled as appropriate by the teacher. This is complemented by the fact that the child's discourse is never present in the teacher's discourse, except when it's being evaluated. So in the conversational exchanges between teacher and children, only children show acceptance of their interlocutor's (that is, the teacher) utterances since repeating another's words shows ratification of them. This fact seems to support the idea of interaction based on control that we talked about before. At the same time, the pattern of repeated words and longer discourse sequences, more than creating a shared universe of discourse seems to create a fixed structure of interaction with little freedom of choice for the children.

From a different point of view, the same phenomena might be explained within a broader theoretical proposal concerning language acquisition in general, and put forward by de Lemos (1992, 1995). Lemos observes that children's first utterances within a discourse-type are extracted from utterances of their interlocutor. Furthermore, she proposes that it is possible to infer from both errors and inadequate use the moment when those frozen fragments are reconstructed and re-signified. Such a process seems to provide support for the view that children's initial position is one of being interpreted by the other's utterances. Their move towards a position of assigning interpretation to their own utterances is consequent to that process.

The choice of one of these two theoretical positions will then lead to different interpretations of the classroom situation since each rests on different ideas about the nature of language. In spite of this, we can find some points of possible coincidence. If the child extracts his first utterances from his interlocutor it is because he is in a type of relationship marked by asymmetry, where the adult interlocutor holds control. This is clearly the case in classrooms, a kind of situation which is always imposed on children: some of them may enjoy being there, but they are in school because their parents send them, and this is in many countries mandated by law. Discourse, as the crystallization of language, presents to the child what is social and ideological in language. By taking up fragments of the teacher's discourse (and adult discourse in general), children enter the universe of their speech community's discourse. In this process they will get into the meanings shared by that community, including conceptions of role and control, and they will develop a psychological identity as well as a social identity.

Now let's try to answer the question of the title: children's and teacher's discourse in the classroom: same or different? At the beginning of the process children repeat sequences of the teacher's discourse without exercising any control over them. Here their discourse seems to be at least partially the same as is the teacher's, but the use and functions are absolutely different. From the point of view of control, this means that the

teacher holds the control and children ratify it by repeating his/her discourse. Repetition or emergence of the same discourse implies then a clear social asymmetry. When the teacher's discourse comes up in children's utterances in a non-conventional way, it becomes clear that it's not the "same" discourse. These instances suggest that the child is really being "spoken by the language", that is, the system of language is functioning in him without his control. In the relationship with the teacher the child will go through the process of gaining independence, that is, the capability of assigning interpretation himself. Only then can we say that the child finally shares the universe of discourse of the teacher (and the rest of the community).

On the other hand, the teacher seems to interpret the emergence of his/her discourse in the child's utterances as appropriate behavior and also as a proof of his learning (of curricular contents, good manners, etc.). In fact, as we have seen, the teacher works in order to promote the repetition of his/her discourse and organizes interaction in the classroom in ways that facilitate this. When a sequence appears in an unexpected way, (s)he tries to put it back where it belongs, that is, to provide the appropriate discourse frame to that sequence. When children's interventions don't agree with the teacher's discourse, (s)he ignores them or corrects them with different strategies (not necessarily with an explicit negative evaluation).

To summarize, in classrooms we can find a process where children first repeat the teacher's discourse from a social and psychological place completely different from the teacher's, and this discourse is interpreted as the "same" by the teacher. Later on, by a process of reconstruction and re-signifying, children become capable of interpreting by themselves, which also gives them the possibility of holding different social roles whenever possible.

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