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Improving classroom discourse through revoicing

Chiel van der Veen & Bert van Oers
VU University Amsterdam, Department of Research and Theory in Education

INTRODUCTION

Oral communicative competences are not only important as a qualification supporting children's social participation (cf. Menting et al., 2011), but have become of eminent importance as a condition for learning in schools as children's learning is increasingly based on conversations between pupils and teachers. To date, however, little attention has been devoted to the development of oral communicative competences in young children and the effect of revoicing (a form of modeling) on children's language development. Therefore, in our research project we aim to explore the possibilities to improve the oral communicative competences in children in the early grades (ages 4-6) of primary education.

LEARNING THROUGH CLASSROOM DISCOURSE

Research in the past decades focused on pupils' collaborative construction of knowledge and understanding in school situations. Several researchers within the socioconstructivist paradigm highlighted the importance of language as a means for communication, as this may determine the quality of learning outcomes (see Amsel & Byrnes, 2002; Kleine Staarman, 2009; Mercer, 2000; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Rojas-Drummond, Albarrán, & Littleton, 2008; Wells, 1999). From this socioconstructivist point of view, knowledge construction is conceived as a learning process which relies on discussion with peers and the teacher (Cazden, 2001). Mercer (2002) has shown that one can sort out discussions into different types, each with different aims. However, all these forms of classroom talk are based on the assumption of participants' oral language ability, whether or not supported by symbolic means (schemes, pictures, graphs, texts, etc.).

ORAL LANGUAGE ABILITY

Oral language ability is conceived as the competence to achieve a personal communicative goal through oral speech (sometimes with the help of additional means, like pictures, schemes, notes) in the form of a response, message, or presentation. The development of this ability encompasses a *knowledge* aspect (adequate and appropriate vocabulary), a *skills* aspect (planning of the message, reflection, anticipation), and an *attitude* aspect (positive or negative appreciation of speech as a social medium). A general assumption regarding learning through classroom conversation is that all students have sufficient oral language skills to effectively participate in conversations. In schools, however, the development of oral language ability is largely left to children's spontaneous development through their participation in

classroom conversations and home literacy experiences. Goal oriented and systematic support of oral language development happens infrequently. Given the importance of children's oral language ability, it is essential to pay attention to it at an early age.

STIMULATING ORAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

In the 80s, Elizabeth Robinson demonstrated that the role of the adult in stimulating children's oral-language development is crucial. The nature of the social interaction of adults with young children determines the development of children's communicative and metacognitive skills. As adults tend to respond more specifically and analytically on children's messages, children showed more progress in their oral communicative and metacognitive skills (see Robinson, 1981, 1983). The main finding from research during this period is that the development of young children's oral language ability can be promoted by a responsive adult, especially when this adult openly (in the communication with the child) analyzes and questions the child's communicative messages. Thus, on an interpersonal level the adult gives (and is) a model for dealing with spoken text.

Based on the aforementioned research, there is reason to assume that modeling plays an important role in the development of (young) children's oral language ability (see also Barnes et al, 1981). In the current research project, we want to study the effect of teachers' modeling on the development of children's oral language ability. Modeling is conceived as an explicit and public action, in which the teacher analytically reflects on the structure of a child's message, particularly from a pragmatic point of view (as opposed to a semantic and syntactic point of view). In this research project, two teaching strategies for modeling of children's oral communicative competence can be distinguished:

1. *Reflecting* on communicative utterances. In Robinson's (1983) study, this strategy is seen as an important stimulus for children's meta-cognitive development.

2. *Revoicing.* This strategy involves the revoicing of children's communicative utterances by reformulating, in ways that credit children with teachers' warranted inferences. Revoicing offers children the opportunity to evaluate the reformulations (of their teacher and/or peers) and can be used to position children in differing alignments with propositions and allow them to claim or disclaim their position (see O'Connor & Michaels, 1996).

METHOD

In our study, the following research question will be explored: *What is the effect of a classroom intervention, based on modeling (reflecting and revoicing) of oral language ability, on the development of oral communicative competence in the early grades (ages 4-6) of primary education?* In order to answer this question, we designed six studies representing four interrelated research phases. An overview of our research project is presented in table 1.

Table 1. *Overview of the research project*

YEAR	STUDY	AIM(S)	N
PHASE 1: CONCEPTUALIZING REVOICING			
1	Literature study	(1) Provide an overview of research on modeling in the language classroom and further conceptualize the idea of revoicing	-
	Survey	(2) Investigate teachers' beliefs with regard to the promotion of children's communicative competences (3) gain insight into current practices in the language classroom	1000 teachers
	Case study	(4) Distinguish patterns and critical incidents in teachers' promotion of oral communicative competence in children	3 schools 3 teachers
PHASE 2: IMPLEMENTING REVOICING			
2	Design study	(5) Develop a classroom intervention that positively values oral communication and demonstrates effective strategies for oral communication through revoicing	3 schools 6 teachers
PHASE 3: MEASURING REVOICING CROSS-SECTIONAL			
3	Effect study	(6) Study the effects of the classroom intervention on children's development of oral communicative competence and speech attitude (cross-sectional)	20 schools 20 teachers 500 children
PHASE 4: MEASURING REVOICING LONGITUDINAL			
3/4	Longitudinal study	(7) Study the effects of the classroom intervention on children's development of oral communicative competence and speech attitude (longitudinal)	20 schools 20 teachers 500 children

ANTICIPATED RESULTS

This research project addresses an important problem in educational theory, namely learning through classroom discourse. Through an empirical investigation of the effects of modeling on the promotion of oral communicative competence, this project aims to contribute to a theory of language use in sociocultural practices. Besides, an evidence based educational strategy for modeling oral communicative competence in young children will be developed. The latter can be seen as a *'practical elaboration of Cultural Historical Activity Theory'*.

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