Role of Repetition in Classroom Discourse

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LLED 7732

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December 5, 2011

Statement of the problem

An important body of qualitative work in discourse analysis has focused on the existence of repetitions in both institutional and non-institutional discourse. From the point of view of functionality, repetitions play an important role in the construction of new meanings and also in the establishment of relationships that take place among participants who interact (Tannen, 2007).

The purpose of this paper analyzes the repetitions in the discourse of a second grade teacher and its students within the thematic unit of "Using Literature to Talk about Social Issues in the Classroom". The data that I was provided consists of videotapes of the interactions between the teacher and the students during the development of the above-mentioned unit. I will examine the participant's speech paying special attention to the types and function that repetition plays in their discourse, and its variation according to the different interactions that take place. Moreover, I will discuss the position that teachers and students play in each interaction, the interactional consequences of those roles, and the educational implications of the findings. I will argue that, according to Silva and Santos (2006), "through repetitions, participants in interaction frame the way they situate themselves in relation to what is being talked about as well as in relation to co-interactants" (p.1)

I begin this paper with the description of the background context in which these interactions took place, including school demographics, data about ELL students in the school and classroom context. I will then, analyze the classroom discourse from the point of view of Language Socialization, Interactional Sociolinguistics and Ethnography of Communication. Through this analysis, I will be able to identify the contexts in which repetition takes place and the function that this feature has in the discourses produced by both teacher and students. Then, I

will provide some educational implications in order to help teachers to improve their spoken

discourse choices, in the context of a multicultural classroom with English language learners.

Context

Since I am going to analyze the classroom discourse from an ethnographic perspective, I

am going to look at the context in which the interactions were produced. I will provide

information about the school district, the particular school and the classroom in which the

discourse were developed.

City and school context

River Town Elementary School is located in the state of Massachusetts, in particular, in

the urban district of Springfield. The population of Springfield is 156.983, and it is the third

largest city in the state. 48.5% of the school population in the city is Latino Students (Willet et

al, 2008).

Angela Holman was part of the ACCELA program to meet new teaching requirements

and to further her knowledge of second-language and literacy development after the elimination

of transitional bilingual education in Massachusetts in 2002 (Willet et al, 2008).

In 2004-2005, this school served approximately 750 students in grades kindergarten

through fifth grade. Under the category of race, 68% of the students were Latino, 25% were

African American, 7% were White. What is more, ninety-two percent of all the students were

eligible to receive free or reduced price lunch. According to 2003-04 No Child Left Behind

report card, the school ranked as one of the lowest performing in Massachusetts Springfield

Public Schools, 2004 (Willet et al, 2008).

Classroom

Angela Holman, of mixed Italian and American Indian heritage, is a second grade mainstream teacher. Her class for this study consisted of 17 students, with 5 African American and 12 Latinos. Four of her students were English language learners with diverse proficiency levels. In addition, eight students were considered behavioral students. This classroom was particularly known in the school for its frequent behavioral issues and for sociocultural issues such as the prohibition of speaking in a language other than English and the difficult situation that some of the families were encountering at the moment of the research. Due to behavioral issues, academic performing was declining is this classroom and punitive discipline became less and less effective (Willet et al, 2008).

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Theoretical Framework

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Language Socialization

I am going to analyze the data I was provided within the analytical framework of language socialization. According to Duff (2002), Language Socialization is related to both linguistic and interactional processes that take place in habitual cultural practices, in which language is produced such as literacy activities, with the aim of improving competence and identification in particular discourse communities. Therefore, this theory is especially important in this specific context because of the numerous interactions that take place in a classroom in which students with diverse backgrounds and identities are involved. From this framework, "language must be studied as a system, not as isolated items; it is otherwise difficult to see the direct relationship between isolated surface features of language and particular teaching strategies"(Gibbons, 2006, p.39). This paper seeks to understand "how repetition is used in socializing interactions in a particular community, how these uses are socially organized, and

how this organization shapes and is shaped by community members' beliefs, values, and

ideologies" (Moore, 2012, p.210). With this perspective in mind, I am going to make use of two

effective tools in order to understand the classroom discourse that is developed in this particular

context by the students and the mainstream teacher of this multicultural classroom. These tools

are Ethnography of Communication (EOC) and Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS).

Ethnography of Communication

Duff (2002) proposes the Ethnography of Communication approach as a viable, context-

and culture-sensitive method for conducting research in the area of classroom discourse (p.289).

Ethnography of Communication or Ethnography of Speaking is related to the investigation of the

rules of speaking that "are operative in particular language- using communities" (Cameron,

2001, p.55). Cameron (2001) states that "researchers who favor discourse analysis over

supposedly more 'objective' methods argue that paying attention, not merely to *what* people say

but to *how* they say it, give additional insight into the way people understanding things" (p.14)

Through this tool I am going to analyze how English language learners and native speakers on

English that participate in the same classroom make use of language, more specifically, how they

make use of repetitions. I will look at word choices, grammar selected and particular use of

language in certain classroom interactions.

 Interactional Sociolinguistics

This paper also takes a socio-linguistic view of the reality created by a multicultural

classroom within the thematic unit of "Using Literature to Talk about Social Issues in the

Classroom". According to Tannen (2005), interactional sociolinguistics studies "how language

conveys meaning in interaction" (p.205) Therefore, it does not look at how language is produced

by individual speakers but rather, it is concerned with the intercultural interaction that takes

place between participants. Bailey (2008) states that interactional sociolinguistics "attempts to bridge the gulf between empirical communicative forms – e.g., words, prosody, register shifts – and what speakers and listeners take themselves to be doing with these forms" (p.2314)

Methodology

For this analysis, I was provided with seven videos of around fifty minutes long each that reflected the interactions that took place in Angela Holman's classroom for several weeks within the thematic unit of "Using Literature to Talk about Social Issues in the Classroom". In addition to this video footage, I was provided with four PowerPoint presentations that included information about the social context of this second grade classroom including specific data used for a previous research project that was associated with focus students. In the first phase of my analysis, I watched the videos looking for common discourse patterns in the classroom and analyzed the context in which these patterns were developed. In the second micro-linguistics phase of my analysis, I chose to focus on the participants' use of repetition. I examined the context in which repetitions were produced and role that they played in the classroom.

The research questions put forward are the following:

1. What is the role of repetition in the multicultural classroom analyzed?

2. What type of repetitions is used by the teacher and the students?

Analysis

<u>Convention key</u>

Latching: =

Overlapping: //

Repetition to be analyzed: <u>Underlined</u>

Context: *Italicized*

Raised Pitch: ↑

Lowered Pitch: ↓

Elongated vowel: vo:wel

Excerpt 1

Angela is about to read a story to her students with the purpose of identifying the feelings of the character in the book, to connect those feelings to themselves as part of the thematic unit of "Using Literature to Talk about Social Issues in the Classroom". The students are sitting down on their bottom on the spot that Angela had previously chosen for each of them.

Angela: I am going to (.) read a story to you↑ and in the story…everyone sitting up on their bottoms. *(She sits on the chair).* We are going to, we are going to try to find out reading the story, what the theme is of the story ok? ↑ and how the characters are feeling ↑ *(She stands up and goes towards one of the students to make him sit properly)*. Remember now, the reason we are doing this is to be able to identify what? Feelings//

Kids: //Feelings

Angela: … in characters and beings. So eventually, we can <u>connect</u> those feelings <u>to</u>

<u>ou:r</u> ↑ =

Kid: = <u>self</u>=

Angela: =<u>To ourself</u>. We are going to <u>self text-connections</u>. So if you can remember a

time that something like this has happened to you. […]

The system of taking turns in this interaction is the traditional T-S-T-S-T (teacher-

student- teacher) and the pattern of interaction is Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF). The first

one to talk is Angela, the teacher. She asks a question to the students in form of a declarative

sentence that they have to complete. She uses a special intonation pattern when she says " we can

connect those feelings to our..." She lengths the word "our" and raises the intonation in order to

show the students that she is looking for the completion of the word and therefore, for their

participation. The students understand what the teacher is doing and they are able to successfully

say what the teacher is looking for by saying "self". In order to validate the students' response,

she repeats the correct answer again and then, she puts it in a longer sentence to summarize and

remind them what they are going to do. According to this, the type of repetition that is happening

in this excerpt is allo-repetition; Angela repeats what a student has said in order to demonstrate

that his answer was right. According to Tannen (2007), Angela's repetition plays the function of

participatory listenership. It shows that the individual is listening and therefore is able to accept

what was said. What is more, this repetition does not just evaluate the answer, it also "provides

feedback for ongoing interaction, building another sequence into it" (Rymes, 2009, p.113) when

the teacher continues saying "so if you can remember a time that something like this has

happened to you" According to Rymes (2009), the feedback turn encourages students to express

their previous experiences, make reflections and think critically.

Excerpt 2

An English language learner called François is sat far away from the teacher when the

following interaction takes place.

> **Teacher:** François, <u>can you sit over here</u> *(points at the place she wants him to sit)* <u>so you</u>
>
> <u>can see the pictures?</u> ↑ These are really good pictures**.** Then <u>you need to sit in a place</u>
>
> <u>you can see</u> *(François moves to his new spot)*.

In this section of the interaction, Angela is the only participant who talks. However, she

is not talking to herself. There is an interaction going on because she is talking to one of her

students, François, who is sitting far away from where she is and listening to her. Angela uses the

name of the student to start the interaction and address her request. On this occasion, Angela

realizes a self-repetition when she talks because she repeats something that she has already said.

However, this repetition is not an exact repetition. It is a repetition with variation. The first

difference that can be noticed is that the first sentence is an interrogative sentence; however, in

the repetition, the speaker uses an imperative sentence. This change might have been produced

because Angela's awareness of François' condition of English learner. The first sentence is more

complicated than the second one because it contains a conjunction and auxiliary verbs, among

other words, that make the sentence more complex and therefore, more difficult to process.

Besides, this type of question seems to be a yes/no question. François is a new student in the

community and also an English learner. The fact that he does not speak English fluently could

make him think of the teacher's question as a yes/ question instead of a request, which is actually

the teacher's intention, and produce a misunderstanding in the interaction. However, the second

repetition is a request in the form of statement and in a more direct way, making the discourse

more explicit, clearer and easier to carry out. Therefore, the function of Angela's use of

repetition is to facilitate the understanding of her request. What is more, Angela's use of

repetitions position herself as the one who regulates the prompt and consequently the one who

has the power to control the interaction.

Excerpt 3

This excerpt is a continuation of excerpt 2. It has been separated from the previous one

just to isolate the repetitions that occur in this small piece of teacher's talk.

Teacher: Before we begin reading I want you to look at the cover, ↓ just look at the

cover ↑ *(Teacher shows the cover to the students)* It is Matthew and Tilly, look at the

cover and think about… ↑ // *(Erica and François go toward the teacher raising their*

hand).

In this excerpt, the teacher continues talking to her students. She is giving directions

about what they have to do next. Spontaneously, in only few seconds she repeats a command

three times. The first time she says, " I want you to look at the cover". She uses the pronoun "I"

to show that she is the one that is ordering them to do something. With this request, Angela is

positioning herself as the participant who has the power in the interaction. The second repetition

slightly changes; she adds the word "just" at the beginning of the sentence and eliminates "I want

you to look". Through this change, the teacher makes sure that the students only look at the

cover and not at something else. Therefore, its function is to foster the students understanding of

the procedure they have to follow. In the third repetition, the teacher makes the command as

simpler as possible by just saying, "Look at the cover". As Johnstone et al. (1994) pointed, all

the repetitions have the function of calling hearers' attention. This function is especially

noticeable in the last repetition. Some of students are sitting down and paying attention to what

the teacher is saying; however some of them are standing and walking around the classroom, or just sitting on their bottoms but thinking in something else that is not related to the cover of the book. Repetition is the strategy that Angela uses in order to get the students attention. Again, this use of the repletion positions Angela as the one who regulates the classroom interactions.

Excerpt 4

This interaction takes place minutes after excerpt 3. Students are sitting on their bottoms and Angela is in front of them showing the cover of the book. François has noticed something familiar in the cover. He raises his hand to ask for permission to talk and show what he discovered. Angela allows François to stand up and show his finding.

François: *(He gets a picture and shows it to the teacher)* <u>This picture looks like the other boy</u> *(points at the picture)*

Angela: Ahh, did you hear that? ↑ *(she looks at the rest of the students smiling)* Could you turn around and tell them? ↑

François: <u>This picture looks like this girl and this boy</u>

Angela: <u>The picture looks like the sa:me…</u> ↑ <u>//</u>

Kid: //Because they [*inaudible]*

Angela: Are they doing the same thing?

Kids: Yeah! <u>No!</u>=

Angela: =<u>No:… but it's the sa:me… people!</u> ↑ (Looks at François smiling) Good job!

(She strokes François's head) Yeah. (*Africa stands up, goes towards the teacher and gets another picture)*

François, one of the English language learners in the classroom quietly explains to the teacher that the picture that he has on his hands "looks like the other boy". Therefore, his classmates are not able to hear what he said. François' initiative to start a new interaction breaks the usual system of turns that starts with the intervention of the teacher. However, the turn-taking system follows the traditional pattern S-T-S-T-S-T-S-T. The teacher's reaction to the kid's comment is the rhetoric question "did you hear that?" This question is directed to the rest of the students. Angela takes advantage of the second turn in the conversation to regulate the interaction. The fact that she uses this rhetoric question shows validation of the student's comment. In addition, she approves François' observation by asking him to repeat it louder and share it with the rest of the classroom through the question, "Could you turn around and tell them? According to Silva and Santos (2006), since the student is asked to repeat his comment, the repetition is considered obligatory. The teacher is the one who regulates the interaction and therefore, the repetition does not come from François' own initiative. Angela might have used the technique of repetition to help François to improve his speaking skills, encourage his participation in the classroom and, foster social interaction with the classroom. However, when François self-repeats what he just said to the teacher, he changes a little bit his response. Instead of saying, "this picture looks like the other boy", he decides to change his word choice and make his answer a little bit more explicit and concrete by saying, "this picture looks like this girl and this boy". This variation demonstrates François' ability to rephrase sentences in English, in a context where his modified speech will suppose a better understanding for his peers without

changing the meaning of the sentence. Right after, the teacher intervenes and tries to validate his

response by repeating what he said with a slight variation. However, she can't finish the sentence

because one of the students interrupts her with another comment. The teacher ignores the

comment of this kid because she wants to continue with what she was saying and because the

students who said that comment did not raise the hand to talk, a norm that all the students in the

classroom know. This attitude demonstrates the teacher's power to regulate the classroom. The

teacher continues asking to the classroom, " are they doing the same thing?" Different answers

come up. In order to show which one is the right one, she first repeats the right answer to her last

question by repeating it and then, she says what she wanted to say before she was interrupted:

"but it is the same... people!". This last repetition is a self- repetition with a variation respecting

her previous repetition. Angela says the right answer at the same time as she looks at François

and congratulates him for his accurate previous observation. Angela also says with a big smile

and stroking his hair, "good job" and "yeah" to express that he did a good work seeing those

similarities. However, in this case, the evaluation that Angela provides to François concludes the

sequence and do not promote more talk that in this case, would especially beneficial for this

English learner.

Excerpt 5

Angela started to read the book. The students are in front of her sitting on their bottom.
Angela reads about Mathew and Tilly riding a bicycle and the class starts a discussion about
who has ever ridden a bicycle. However, François says aloud something very hurtful to one of
his classmate in front of everyone.

François: <u>She is too fat she can´t ride that</u> ↑ *(points at a girl)*

Angela: Ready?

Kid 1: <u>Did you hear what François said?</u> ↑

Angela: *(Reads the book)…* They sa:w… *(She touches kid 1's hand)*

Kid 2: <u>Did you hear what François said? François said: 'She is too fat, she can't ride a</u>

<u>bike'.</u>

Kid 1: <u>That is what François said.</u>

Angela: You know what? you know what? We are going to stop here *(She stops reading)*

François makes a very hurtful comment about one of his classmates but Angela ignores it

when she continues with the activity and says "Ready?" However, François' classmates have

heard it and have also realized how rude was to say that. For that reason, they spontaneously try

to call the attention of Angela. One of these students makes use of his individual agency when he

interacts with the teacher and says, "Did you hear what François said?" He could have ignored it

as the teacher did, but he asked this question to the teacher to make sure that the teacher had

heard it. Angela makes used of her individual agency and continues reading the book without

paying attention to the uncomfortable situation that is going on in the classroom. A second kid

still thinks that Angela has not heard what François said because she is not doing anything about

it. The thematic unit they are working on is making them be much more conscious of what is

going in the classroom than they were before. Students are aware of what is going around them

at that moment and the behavior problems students in that classroom have. Although it is

something to what they are used to, they are able to recognize them and criticize them. This

second student repeats exactly what the previous kid said and he also repeats what François said.

Since the student thinks that Angela did not hear François comment, the students make use of the

exact word that François used in order to be as objective as possible and explain what exactly happened. Different students are participating and interacting in the conversation. The type of repetitions that is happening is allo-repetition because they are repeating something that another person has previously said. What is more, all of these repetitions are exact repetition. The purpose of these exact repetitions are therefore, displaying what exactly happen and avoid ambiguity. Since an English learner has said a cruel comment, his classmates are able to make use of repetition to support interactions between native and non-native speakers of English. After several turns where students talked, Angela decides that this problem should be treated in the classroom. The use of repetition has been a powerful tool to catch the attention of Angela and therefore, regulate what was going on in the classroom.

Implications

The purpose of carrying out an ethnographic and sociolinguistic analysis of the discourse produced by second graders and their teacher is to understand current linguistic practices that take place in multicultural classrooms, and move teachers and students forward a better use of repetition as a significant tool to encourage classroom interactions between native speakers and non-native speakers. The analysis has shown the strengths but also the weaknesses of the use of repetition as a resource to promote social interaction in the classroom. The excerpt selection reveals that through interactions with members of the community, children will demonstrate a significant improvement on their linguistic abilities and awareness of the culture in which they live. Using Ethnography of Communication (EOI) and Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS) within the theoretical framework of Language Socialization to analyze classroom interactions, provides information of both language development and sociocultural context in which they were produced.

Teachers make use of repetition to maintain control of classroom interactions. It can be easily noticeable in the Initiation – Response –Feedback (IRF) pattern of interaction in excerpt number 1. By repeating the student's response, the teacher showed her listening skills and marked it as valid and relevant in the interaction. Teachers are able to make use of repetition as a powerful tool that fosters the creation of a third turn right after providing feedback and, that can promote further interactions in the classroom. For this reason, teachers should be aware of the benefits that the use of repetitions have, and make use of their individual agency to promote social interaction in the classroom on this way.

Calling the attention of the hearers is one of the most common functions of repetition in classrooms that consist of a significant number of behavioral students. The use of the same sentence several times in the same speech seems to be beneficial for students that did not listen to the first sentence or to catch the attention of the ones who were distracted at that moment. However, I feel like the continuous use of repetition with this purpose can lose it effectiveness if abused of it. Teachers should make use of repetition in necessary moments or use alternative methods in order to keep its efficiency.

Often, teachers in classrooms that are made up of several English learners use repetition as a technique to help students getting a better understanding of a task. Although repetition seems to be an effective way to improve student's comprehension, it is necessary to be conscious of the best way to utilize this tool. Usually, if a student has not understood a direction the first time, he or she is not going to understand it the second time if the teacher uses the exactly the same words. For this reason, teachers should be aware of the importance of other types of repetition such as repetition with variation or rephrasing, to provide students with familiar linguistics structures that can relate to the new ones and can foster their language development.

Although repetition for understanding is significant with English Language Learners, teachers should not use them excessively. Concerning this aspect, in general, students do not like to feel special in the classroom. Even if we use repetition with our best intentions, students might see themselves as different or delayed comparing to their native classmates.

Teachers can use the strategy of repetition for improvement of the student's oral skills. Through this technique, students will be able to put in practice their English speaking and actively participate in classroom interactions. Teachers can help to make sure that all the students have the opportunity to became valuable members in the classroom and therefore, in the community.

Language socialization research shows how the use of repetition in a multicultural classroom is shaped by cultural values and beliefs of the particular community where they occur. Through the use of appropriate tools such as Ethnography of Communication and Interactional linguistics, language socialization will make clear the role of repetition as essential to support social interaction in conversations between students with different backgrounds, learning experiences, and identities.

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