

Communicative Practices in a Bi-/Multilingual, Rural, Fourth Grade Classroom in Kenya

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Abstract

Today, multilingualism in primary education is a reality that must be fully embraced in language and literacy research. Multilingualism is the norm in schools due to linguistic heterogeneity in classrooms. Despite the growth of bilingual education all over the world in the twenty-first century (Chimbutane, 2011; Garcia, 2009), there remains little understanding around how two or more languages interact and affect learning. This study was designed to understand and document how emerging bilingual or multilingual speakers deploy their communicative practices, specifically in a fourth grade rural classroom in Kenya, and how the deployment of those resources affects knowledge construction and access to literacy. To do so, I draw on sociocultural (Bakhtin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978) and cognitive (Collier, 1995; Cummins, 1979; 1981) theoretical perspectives. These theoretical perspectives permit recognition of the importance of native languages in the development of literacy in a second language (L2), as well as the importance of sociocultural contexts as influences on literacy learning (Bakhtin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978, 2012). A qualitative case study approach was employed to understand the communicative practices of emerging multilingual children in a fourth grade classroom. The study was carried out in a rural primary school in eastern Kenya. The participants included the school principal, the English and science teachers, five focal students, and five parents of those students. The data collection procedures included classroom observations, interviews, shadowing, collection of artifacts, and home visits. The findings indicate that while safe talk strategies predominate in English language arts classrooms, students also would engage unofficial literacies during those lessons, an indication of a disconnection caused either by a language barrier or other factors. In the science classroom, the teacher used (officially disallowed) translanguaging approaches, which raised student participation and disrupted the Initiation, Response Feedback (IRF) discourse pattern that otherwise, prevailed in the English language arts classrooms. Additionally, students used their multilingual resources in both writing and speaking practices, even when they were required to use one language. These literacy practices suggest that students enact their lived practices in school settings, thereby disclosing a need to consider and put to good purpose those resources that they bring to school. Another major finding is *language as a problem* and *time on task* ideologies that were entrenched in the language practices and linguistic decisions made by the education stakeholders (parents, students, and teachers alike). These ideologies were embodied in daily literacy practices and were articulated, and imposed, through institutional policies. We find that these ideologies eventuate in the exclusion of the rural children from literacy access due to a language barrier. They also lead to changes in pedagogical strategy such that teachers resort to *teaching to the test*, helping students simply to memorize formulaic phrases necessary to pass a test. In this way, student creativity and voices are silenced, and education is distanced from the child. This deployment of linguistic resources then reproduces social inequalities, most of all in the conditions that lead to continued mass illiteracy in rural settings. I call for a *heteroglossic multilingual pedagogy*, for bilingual and emerging multilingual children in rural Kenya. Such an

education acknowledges the sociohistorical and ideological bases of current language-in-education policies—not only, for example, an exclusive choice of English for literate social functions and the reservation of indigenous languages for oral interpersonal relations and storytelling—but also the effects that this has had on formation of linguistic ideologies and attitudes towards knowledge in certain languages. Heteroglossic multilingual education acknowledges that different languages index varying viewpoints, challenges the stratification of language that tends undesirably towards oppressive universality rather than liberating heterogeneity, and holds out the feasibility of making informed decisions to support and enable the multiple voices of children, through channels like stylization and hidden dialogicality (Bakhtin, 1981). Through heteroglossic multilingual education, education can be connected or reconnected to children, so that children can be guided to acquire and use a foreign language without negating their existing linguistic resources and identities.

Keywords: communication, bi-lingual, multilingual, fourth grade, rural, classroom, kenya

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