

TRANSLANGUAGING AS SCAFFOLDING FOR LEARNING IN BILINGUAL BIMODAL CLASSROOMS.

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at ways in which bimodal bilingual classroom talk can foster curriculum and language learning by exploring the role of 'translanguaging' in deaf education. Translanguaging describes the planned and systematic use of two languages for teaching and learning which recognises ways in which learners alternate and blend languages, using the repertoires available to them, for learning and meaning making. The paper presents three examples of bimodal bilingual classroom interaction. These are analysed to illustrate the flexible ways in which teachers use sign and spoken language to support different learning activities and different learners and to highlight the complex and nuanced decisions about language use that they make in their interactions with deaf children. This analysis reveals the potential of translanguaging for facilitating dialogic and contingent classroom talk which scaffolds learning. The conclusion considers the potential of translanguaging as pedagogy and the need for practitioners to adopt mindful translanguaging strategies which build on the language repertoires of bilingual learners and provide robust scaffolding for learning.

INTRODUCTION

The changing climate of deaf education gives cause for a re-focusing of bimodal bilingual classroom approaches. Deaf children's contexts for learning are changing as access to inclusive education is afforded by advanced hearing technologies and Newborn Hearing Screening secures access to these technologies and early intervention programmes from birth. These advances have changed the language and communication profiles of deaf children (Mayer and Leigh 2010). However, there are still many educational challenges for these learners, who, although better equipped to access the mainstream curriculum through spoken language, still benefit from a bimodal bilingual approach for a range of language, learning and social needs.

In response to this changing language landscape, bimodal bilingual approaches need to evolve and embrace the diverse language learning profiles of deaf children. Specifically, we need to closely examine the way in which sign and spoken/written languages are used in the classroom and how different types of language use support learning. Developing bimodal bilingual pedagogies entails a review of what we know and what we can learn from other bilingual contexts, as well as revisiting some of the essential conditions that facilitate learning in the classroom.

BIMODAL BILINGUAL PEDAGOGY IN DEAF EDUCATION

In the deaf education research there is some exploration of the bimodal and bilingual use of sign language and spoken/written language in the teaching context but it is not extensive. Some studies have explored the role of sign language as a bridge to facilitate the learner's access to written language. There are also studies which have tried to evaluate the specific role of English-based signing in improving deaf children's English learning. A number of these studies emphasise the importance of separating languages in teaching. Others have specifically explored the effectiveness of English-based signing to support literacy development. This body of work provides some description of the creative ways that teachers blend or alternate sign and spoken languages to provide lexical, semantic and conceptual support for deaf learners. However, there are few studies that document bimodal bilingual classroom strategies in detail (see Swanwick 2015 for a review).

The emphasis in this literature tends to be on mode of delivery. Studies which are concerned with the quality of interaction and learning are sparse. The studies that do exist demonstrate the importance of looking beyond modality in the classroom to the way in which teachers use classroom talk to engage deaf learners, facilitate pupil comprehension and participation in classroom dialogue (Hermans et al. 2014)

CLASSROOM TALK THAT SCAFFOLDS LEARNING

Adults help children learn in the classroom through the nature of their talk around the learning activities. Wood, Wood, Griffiths and Howarth (1986) made some important observations about this in their seminal study of the spoken language interaction between deaf children and their hearing teachers. Their study identified 'contingency' and 'control' as two key features of talk between deaf children and their teachers that impact on quality interaction and learning.

Contingency and control

Contingency describes adult talk which helps learning by being finely tuned to the individual's interest, and developing competencies. Examples of this can be seen in early interaction where parents imbue their child's communication with intention and respond accordingly such as 'you want a drink don't you...here you are'. Control is concerned with reciprocal roles in a conversation and the adults' ability to manage conversation but to relinquish control to enable pupils to initiate and develop conversation. A more controlling style is characterised by repair strategies, such as asking for repetitions and asking closed questions in contrast to less controlling responses such, as the use of phatics, that indicate interest and encourage loquacity and engagement.

Wood et al (1986) concluded from their study that making communication contingent on the pace and focus of the learners' attention and managing the conversation control supports learning and facilitates children's language development. Although this study focused solely on spoken language interaction, it provides pointers for evaluating the quality of communication in bimodal bilingual contexts.

Dialogic teaching

Concern in the UK about the tendency of teachers to dominate talk in general classrooms prompted research into classroom dialogue and the role of the adult in structuring communication which supports learning (Alexander 2003; Mercer 2003). The term 'dialogic teaching' emerged from this work and is now in common use in the UK to describe classroom talk which extends pupils' thinking and scaffolds learning by providing linguistic and conceptual support to bridge the gap between what the learner knows and needs to know. The research has been expanded in the field of science education in particular where collaborative enquiry and problem solving are a central part of the curriculum. The goal of dialogic teaching is to ensure the contribution of all pupils (through whole class dialogue, group and pair work) and expose learners to complex language and the discourse of the discipline in question.

Classroom talk in deaf education

Managing contingency, control and active engagement in classroom dialogue is challenging in the context of deaf education. One reason for this is that classroom talk (whole class, pairs or groups) is often mediated by another adult for deaf learners. This can cut the learner off from the discourse of particular areas of learning. The discursive practices, for example, that are so much part of scientific learning may be difficult to recreate where the classroom talk is mediated through interpretation or explanation.

Group discussion, which in many curriculum areas is designed to enable the co-production of knowledge, may also present particular difficulties for deaf pupils. Engaging in fluent group dialogue can be inhibited by a restricted vocabulary and a lack of experience with the

metaphorical use of language, pervasive in many areas of scientific learning (Molander et al. 2010).

Further, in deaf education we are often dealing with interactional situations which entail the alternate and blended use of sign, spoken, and written language depending on the communication and language profiles of the learners. To explore how contingent, reciprocal, and extended classroom talk can be achieved within a bimodal bilingual communication context the concept of translanguaging is introduced.

TRANSLANGUAGING

Translanguaging is a term taken from the general bilingual literature used to describe ways in which learners and teachers alternate and blend languages, using the repertoires available to them, for learning and meaning making (Baker, 2011). Translanguaging is recognised as having pedagogic value in bilingual classrooms where children benefit from the flexible combined and separate use of languages, according to learning task and context (Creese & Blackledge, 2010).

This term has its origins in bilingual education in Wales, where it was first used to describe the planned and systematic use of two languages for teaching and learning within the same lesson (Lewis et al. 2012a, 2012b). The use of this term signifies a step away from bilingual pedagogies that aim to keep languages separate, to a recognition of the value of the fluid and overlapping use of two or more languages in the classroom to support learning (Cummins 2007; Garcia and Wei Li 2013).

Translanguaging and Total Communication

The term translanguaging focuses on language repertoire and the language practices of bilinguals. This is distinct from Total Communication which is a communication philosophy and approach involving the flexible use of sign and spoken language to meet individual communication needs. Translanguaging is not an educational philosophy or a language approach. Translanguaging refers to the actual language behaviours of bilingual children and adults which support learning. Whilst we are much more likely to see examples of translanguaging in TC environments, translanguaging is concerned, not just with what language repertoires are in play, but with how individuals creatively draw on their language repertoires to scaffold learning.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

To demonstrate ways in which translanguaging is manifested in the deaf education context three examples are presented below of Teachers of the Deaf introducing new curriculum concepts and vocabulary to small groups of deaf children. These excerpts are taken from case studies of teacher's description and analysis of their language use in the bimodal bilingual learning context (Swanwick 2015). The three excerpts illustrate the flexible ways in which teachers use sign and spoken language in the classroom to support different learning activities and different learners' abilities. They also throw light on the complex and nuanced decisions about language use that teachers make in their interactions with deaf children and the language skills and awareness needed to do this. The examples are analysed to explore the extent to which translanguaging can facilitate equality of experience, quality interaction and learning in the classroom.

In these extracts the term Sign Supported English (SSE) refers to the way in the teachers blend their spoken English utterances with contextually correct individual signs (usually meaning-carrying words) from BSL. This is distinct from the use of Signed English (SE) which implies the use of SSE with additional invented signs that indicate English morphemes such as tense markers and pronoun agreement.

Example 1.

The ToD is working with two ten-year-old deaf children to teach new mathematical concepts and vocabulary. One of the children uses BSL as her main language for learning in school. The other child currently prefers to communicate combining sign language and speech. For most of the session the ToD uses Sign Supported English (SSE) to communicate with the children in order to provide equal access to learning. However, for some specific aspects of the session the ToD uses spoken English to provide enhanced opportunities for the child with cochlear implants to develop his speech perception skills. She follows this with repetition in BSL, so as not to exclude the other child from their interaction. The ToD also uses written English to provide additional visual support for learning: The lesson objective, and some of the new mathematical vocabulary is written on the white board, read aloud in spoken English and translated into BSL. The children use Signed English to read the text for themselves.

Example 2.

The ToD is working with four six-year-old deaf children to teach them to tell the time. The four children all use predominantly BSL for communication and learning in class. Two of the children have cochlear implants but need sign language support for learning. Three of the children have a spoken home language other than English. The ToD uses predominantly Sign Supported English to meet the range of needs of the pupils and ensure a fully inclusive teaching session. She also uses BSL at specific points in the lesson to support the conceptual understanding of individual learners. She uses written English throughout the session to provide a visual reinforcement of new vocabulary associated with telling the time and some Signed English to support the written English by reading it aloud.

Example 3.

The ToD is working with seven nine-year-old deaf children in a biology lesson. All seven children predominantly use BSL for communicating and learning at school. Individually the children differently alternate and blend sign and spoken language in learning activities and have different preferences regarding language input from the teacher. The ToD uses Sign Supported English for some of the session. However, new scientific terminology is written on the board and introduced using BSL, spoken English and fingerspelling. Pupils contribute to discussion in their preferred communication style. The ToD adapts her language use in response, modelling the correct use of spoken English or BSL as appropriate. The learners attend to and interact with each other directly adapt their own language as needed. During the session ToD switches to BSL to manage the behaviour and attention of one child and to correct another child who makes an aside that indicates some misunderstanding.

THE PEDAGOGICAL POTENTIAL OF TRANSLANGUAGING

These excerpts illustrate how translanguaging in the deaf education classroom has the potential to enable the features of classroom talk that we have established as supportive of learning. The alternate and blended use of language in the classroom facilitates individual engagement in the process of learning and supports the acquisition of new language, and the development conceptual understanding. There are multiple ways in which this is achieved. Spoken, sign and written language and fingerspelling are sometimes used alongside each other or alternately to provide support for curriculum vocabulary; to support individual understanding and/or model either the correct use of spoken English or BSL.

Equity

The three examples demonstrate ways in which translanguaging enables the teacher to provide equal access to classroom talk for all children accommodating the individual sign and spoken language skills of a mixed group. In these examples this is usually achieved by the blended use of sign and spoken English (SSE) with the group, alternated with the use of BSL or spoken English to clarify and facilitate understanding for individuals.

Control

In each example the teachers use their translanguaging skills to move control in conversation to the learners and encourage their loquacity. Pupils contribute in any language and modality, including for reading aloud, depending on their communication preferences and abilities and teachers are able to respond appropriately. The flexible use of languages in the classroom also enables the learners to respond to each others' ideas directly rather than through the teacher as mediator.

Contingency

The examples also demonstrate how translanguaging provides opportunities for teachers to enable and challenge individual learning and language development. The teachers' decisions about language use are contingent on individual understanding, abilities and interest. Teachers are seen to alternate between languages to capture individual attention; respond to pupil interest or lack of understanding.

Dialogic teaching

In these examples we see the potential of translanguaging to facilitate dialogic teaching that engages the whole group. The teachers are able to draw on all of the language resources in the classroom in their efforts to ensure the contribution of all pupils in whole class dialogue, group and pair work and expose learners to the language and the actual discourse of different disciplines.

CONCLUSION

This paper proposes different way of thinking about bimodal bilingual pedagogy. Translanguaging implies the mindful use of two languages in the classroom to support learning, where the alternate and blended use of these languages is purposeful and responsible. This critical approach to the use of language in the classroom requires nuanced decisions by teachers who are able to use their language awareness to build on children's linguistic abilities for learning.

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