A discursive analysis of the relationships between instruction, learning and the development of the higher mental processes during dialogues about writing between a teacher and three five-year-old children during their first year of formal education

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Abstract

This thesis reports on an observational study using data collection methods which were ethnographic in spirit. The primary data consisted of video recordings of a teacher talking to each of three five-year-old children as they attempted to write simple written language texts. Five such sessions were recorded for each child during the school year. The inquiry was based upon the assumption that most could be learnt about literacy learning by observing successful learners. All three children learnt to write during the year of observation.

While prolonged engagement on the research site, and the use of field notes and informants is ethnographic in emphasis, the methods of analysis, however, were derived from:

- ethnomethodological analyses of talk designed to reveal the ‘commonsense’ knowledge of participants during social interaction;
- studies in discursive psychology which were designed to reveal how the mental processes are constituted through talk;
- studies of educational discourse which showed the ways in which educational knowledge is made common through classroom talk and action.

The analyses were, therefore, designed to expose:

- the children’s socio-cultural knowledge (especially their knowledge of how to participate in ‘story writing’);
- the ways in which mental processes were discursively constructed and used during these ‘story writing sessions’;
- the interaction between instruction and learning during the sessions.
Prolonged engagement at the research site also made possible an examination of the ways in which exchanges between the teacher and the children changed during the year. This permitted conclusions to be drawn about

- the ways in which the children’s knowledge and competence as participants in ‘story writing’ changed during the year;
- the relationships between instruction and learning;
- the relationship between the development of the mental processes and the growth in writing competence.

The analyses of the data show that the role of the teacher in promoting successful literacy learning was very much like the role played by adults in supporting initial language acquisition. Learning to write, like learning to speak, involved the negotiation of understanding and the achievement of shared knowledge. The teacher’s instructional behaviour was characterized by contingency of response, the inclusion of children in decision-making and problem-solving and ‘strategic thinking aloud’ which helped the child to become aware of the mental processes involved in successful task completion.

An important aspect of the children’s growth in competence as writers was that the talk during ‘story writing’ was concerned not just with how to spell words and how to punctuate texts, but also with the development of broader understandings of literacy. Even in this group of five-year-olds the teacher was already developing an awareness of matters of style and an understanding of the purposes of literacy, including an appreciation of the power of literacy as a means of constructing and exploring ‘possible worlds’.

The issue of how the children learnt to recognize and write words is considered at length, not because the author of this thesis considers reading and writing to be essentially matters of word recognition and production, but because information processing accounts of literacy have insisted that sound/letter relationships had to be directly and systematically taught. This assertion was not supported by the current study. While the children learnt to segment speech phonemically and learnt a great deal about letter/sound
relationships during the year, evidence was presented which suggested that learning to recognize and write words essentially involved learning how to exercise conscious control over the mental processes rather than developing automatic responses to print through drills and practices.

In fact, it is concluded that the relationship between the mental processes and the development of writing competence must be considered if a proper understanding of literacy learning is to be developed. It seemed that, in the course of learning to write, the mental processes were reconstructed conversationally in accordance with the demands of the task. ‘Story writing’ was the ‘work’ of the classroom, and the satisfactory completion of this ‘work’ demanded that children developed new ways of attending and remembering and perceiving. For example, ‘story writing’ (as practised in this classroom) demanded that the children should learn to remember where they had previously seen needed words. At first they needed high levels of support to do this, but as they participated in such acts of remembering with their teacher’s assistance, they developed specific ways of remembering over which they could exercise voluntary control. These new ways of remembering then connected with shared experiences of books and reading. Instead of just referring to charts and signs in the classroom, they used their ways of remembering both in constructing their texts, and in checking their invented spellings against the conventional ones in books. This meant that they became aware that books could be used as points of reference, and that they provided contact with other authors and their ways of solving problems. It also contributed to the development of an awareness of conventional ways of telling stories as well as writing words.

The major conclusion of the study is that becoming literate both develops the mental processes, and is dependent on those developments. The constant interaction between learning to write and learning new ways of thinking must be taken into account if adequate and useful explanations of literacy learning are to be developed.
Key to Data Transcriptions

Transcriptions of videotaped data are used extensively in this thesis. The objective was not to produce transcriptions suitable for linguistic analyses, but to represent the talk as accurately as possible while simultaneously making the transcripts easy to read and understand.

Most punctuation is omitted except that
  • capital letters are used for names;
  • conventional use of question marks and exclamation marks is maintained.

When speakers break words into ‘sounds’ an attempt is made to capture the sounds made by the speaker (e.g. cuh-a-tuh) but no attempt has been made to represent phonemes accurately.

Non-verbal aspects of the interaction, and aspects of the physical environment relevant to the talk, are noted in brackets.

- simultaneous utterances indicated by underlining
- / rising intonation
- \ falling intonation
- (????) indecipherable speech
- **bold type** emphatic speech
- CAPITAL LETTERS indicates that the speaker is using letter names
- C-0-M-E indicates that the speaker is spelling the word using letter names
- see::: the sound being made is elongated
- * indicates a pause of less than one second
- <5> indicates a pause of five seconds
- <30> indicates a pause of thirty seconds, and so on