

MUTUAL NEGOTIATION AND THE TEACHING OF WRITING IN A MULTICULTURAL SETTING

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The premise of this paper is that by stressing the social aspects of language and learning, teachers can help ESL children, and indeed all children, to develop competence and confidence as writers. We begin with two assumptions. The first is that whenever possible in elementary classrooms, ESL learners and English speakers are integrated. Compelling evidence from teachers and researchers tells us that every child benefits from integration; that it is consistent with a multicultural outlook is an added incentive. Our second assumption is that the most effective approach to language within an integrated classroom is one which is consistent with whole language. In other words, another type of integration also occurs—the integration of reading, writing and oral language across a wide variety of language functions.

This is *not* another article about whole language; rather, we wish to make the point that in the implementation of such an approach, the teacher can provide for the language learning needs of all children by making the complementary experiences of language and learning communal events within the classroom. It is by stressing the social aspects of language and learning that we build competence and confidence in all aspects of language use, from informal through academic. And as Gordon Wells

demonstrated so forcibly in *The Meaning Makers* (1986), children's success in school is very clearly dependent upon their early success in literacy.

Before we go on to describe the kinds of social interaction we believe important, a disclaimer is in order. Ideally, in a society which values cultural pluralism, children would be educated in their native languages and cultures. There is an inherent conflict between the notion of multiculturalism and the requirement that English be the only language of instruction in schools. It is, nevertheless, the case that in North America (outside Quebec and parts of New Brunswick), because of a variety of fiscal and bureaucratic constraints, English is the language of instruction in the schools. It is thus particularly important that the schooling we provide for children from non-majority backgrounds be as compassionate, as accepting, as "user friendly" as possible. We take the position that by stressing the community of language users, the community of the classroom, we not only provide such an environment, but we also help children from all language backgrounds to become more effective readers, writers, language users.

Donald Graves observed some time ago that learning to write should be as natural as learning to speak. There are no doubt maturational constraints on when the process begins, but given the right environment, children join the community of writers as easily as they joined the community of language users. Over nearly two decades, we have learned a great deal about the environment that produces writers. We have learned that it must provide opportunities for real writing for real purposes and that writing occurs ideally within a community of writers. Although we have made a great deal of progress in creating opportunity and motivation for real writing, we have made less in establishing a community of writers. Where some of the children in the classroom community are second language learners faced with the dual task of acquiring the oral and the written language, this omission is especially serious.

The notion of a community of writers highlights the paradox of the writing process, namely that while becoming a writer may involve community, the act of writing is one of the loneliest of human endeavours. That is to say, we speak and listen together and, in the main, we write and read alone. This paradox, however, makes our mission clear—to bridge the gap between the social environment that nurtured the acquisition of the oral language

and the singular, isolated environment in which children first encounter the blank page.

Certainly there is abundant evidence that the gap should be bridged, with many researchers concluding that meaning-making in writing closely parallels the meaning-making that occurs in speech. Myers (in Squire, 1987) argues that there is a fundamental similarity in the underlying forms of oral and written discourse, quoting Tannen's (1982) observation that "features that have been associated exclusively with spoken or written language are often found in discourse in the other mode" (1982, 8). Myers (in Squire, 1987) also quotes Cooper's view that the "fundamental communicative process" is the same in both oral and written language. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1982) point out, moreover, that oral language plays a vital part in the writing process, linking new symbols with old experiences.

For the young writer, then, talk serves an important function in a number of ways, ways designed to make writing less a solitary act and more a collaborative venture. To understand how and why this is the case, we need only to examine those aspects of social context in which oral language is acquired to see which can be "transported" to the acquisition of written language. Research and informal observations of children acquiring language in the mainstream culture which dominates our schools suggest that the interaction between the child and at least one adult (usually the mother) has particular characteristics. Even in cultures where the patterns of interaction differ, there is abundant evidence that language is acquired to be used and that it is used.

The overriding pattern of the interaction between a child and the principal caregiver is that it is mutually negotiated. In particular, as Lindfors (1987) has pointed out, there is a joint focus of attention between mother and child, a joint construction of conversation, a joint building of a repertoire of interaction formulas and routines and, most important for transfer to the school setting, a joint construction of a shared world of experience. These kinds of mutual negotiation may not be typical of all classroom interaction, but, we would argue, should be, and in two classes we observed recently, they were.

Using Lindfors's categories of interaction, we would like to describe the mutual negotiation which we saw operating in two elementary schools. One was an inner city school where we observed a grade three class with 24 children, only eight of whom were

native English speakers. The second school was a University demonstration school where we observed grades four, five, and six. Nearly all of the children in this school were native speakers of English.

THE JOINT FOCUS OF ATTENTION

It is common practice in teaching to try to focus children's attention on a particular subject or object or activity in the classroom; we even insist that some kind of focus of attention, usually teacher-directed, be an element of our student-teachers' formal lesson plans. Our observations have suggested, however, that the most successful means of focusing attention are those that are jointly negotiated. A good example came from the inner city class. The teacher had organized her curriculum around a series of themes and concentrated at least 30% of class time on the writing process. She chose all the themes for the year before the school year started. The first three went smoothly, but when she started to introduce Whales, the children were less than enthusiastic.

At recess or whenever they congregated to talk among themselves, most of their talk was of transformers and they often wrote about transformers in their journals. They made it clear that they wanted to continue that talk in class. Indeed, they provided the teacher with most of her knowledge about transformers. She listened as they made their case to do a unit on transformers, and because she knew little about the subject and needed time to plan, she negotiated a compromise. They would do another theme, which they would choose by voting, and then they would do transformers. In that way, she would have time to do her homework and provide some guidance as they *mutually* undertook to talk and write about transformers.

We observed a similar situation in which rebellion led to negotiation in the demonstration school. Here, a common practice of the teachers was to engage the children in mapping and webbing, strategies highly favored by the teachers. The children, however, were quite adamant in stating that this kind of planning did not help them with their writing. As one student put it, "No one draws a web each time they write. We only use webbing when we are having trouble with our stories." Another complained, "They are just trying to make us web. But we really don't like webbing."¹ When the teacher backed off *her* preferred strategy and let the

children follow their own intuitions about what kind of planning they needed—in other words, when she mutually negotiated their focus of attention—they did two things. They talked to themselves and they talked to each other before they wrote and as they wrote. Some examples of that talk and the effect it had on their writing and learning follow in our description of the other three kinds of negotiations.

We saw other types of negotiation as well. In conferences with children, teachers often had to negotiate what they would focus their attention on. While both teachers showed willingness to follow the child's agenda for the conference, there were often times when there was some aspect of the writing that the teacher wanted to discuss. There was seldom a problem so long as the teacher let the child go first. Then the teacher was able to raise her own points. When a teacher forgot this simple "rule," however, both she and the child found the conference neither productive nor satisfying.

THE JOINT CONSTRUCTION OF CONVERSATION

Writing, like speech, is a form of verbal communication involving at least two people. It is quite natural in conversation for the parties to negotiate jointly both the topics and the structure of the conversation. How this might happen in writing, is, perhaps, less obvious, but the children we observed taught us how it occurs and how important it is that it does occur. We learned by observing the children and their teachers that it is easier for the beginning writer if much of the writing is jointly constructed, whereby jointly we mean not only the child working with the teacher but the other children as well—in a *community of language users*.

Frequently, joint negotiation occurs in the plotting of a story. Talking with Daniel, a child in the demonstration school, about the problem of writer's block, we asked him what he did when he was stumped. He replied:

I just sit and think and sometimes I ask people who are sitting by me . . . like Ian always sits by me at conference and I say 'Ian, what do you think should happen next in my story,' or something like that.

Two pieces of writing from the urban school provide more concrete examples of "society's construction" in the creation of stories. The children had heard the story "The Enormous Turnip"

and Tung, an ESL learner with very limited English, talked the story over with his teacher before beginning his own story:

- Tung: I like the story.
Teacher: The one about the turnip?"
Tung: Yeah. I want to write one, too.
Teacher: That's good. Do you want to write about a turnip?
Tung: (after thinking for a moment) No. Something else.
Like this. (He points to an orange-colored book binding.)
Teacher: An orange?
Tung: No. (He looks puzzled.)
Teacher: A carrot?
Tung: Yeah! They eat carrot.
Teacher: Do you want to tell me the rest of the story?
Tung: No, I write.

Tung's finished story relied heavily on the one he had heard, but he had negotiated *his* meaning with his teacher.

THE BIG CARROT

Once upon a time a farmer planted a carrot and he saw it's ready to pull. Then he pulled it and he can't pull it out so he called his wife. Help! Help! Do you hear my shout? I pulled the carrot but it wouldn't come out. So his wife came and helped the farmer and they pulled it out and they have a nice dinner.

Jill, another child in the same class, began her negotiations a little later in the process. After finishing a first draft, she read it to two other children in a writer's conference. She had followed essentially the same pattern as the original, but in her story, she had several people helping the farmer to pull out a giant sunflower. A child named Andrew (an ESL learner, incidentally) detected an inconsistency:

- Andrew: It's good, but why d'ya wanna pull out the sunflower? (Jill looks puzzled but doesn't answer.)
Andrew: I mean, why don't you just cut it?
Jill: Yeah!

In her final draft, Jill incorporated Andrew's suggestion, making hers a jointly constructed story.

THE BIG SUNFLOWER

Once upon a time on a sunny day a farmer said, Help! Help! Do you hear my shout? I pulled the sunflower But it wouldn't come out." Then

he called his wife and they pulled and they pulled but the sunflower didn't come out. So they called for their little girl. Then she heled on to her mother and they pulled and they pulled. A little boy came and said, "cut it." So they did and they were happy.

Throughout our observations, we saw children negotiating their meanings, whether in written stories or in conversation. When Matthew, a child from Central Europe with almost no English, entered the class in December, we watched as those more proficient with the language helped him to negotiate his meanings. As Matthew struggled with his new language, the others joined in the effort. They assumed, without being told, that the business of communicating was everybody's job and to Matthew's benefit (and theirs), they guessed, gestured, and laughed their way to meaning.

JOINT BUILDING OF A REPERTOIRE OF FORMULAS AND ROUTINES

A third way in which language learning is mutually negotiated is in the joint building of interaction formulae and routines. As Lindfors points out, one of the aspects of negotiation is working out, in Bruner's terms, "expectable ways of doing things together" (Bruner 1981, 44 quoted in Lindfors 1987, 205). This was certainly part of the children's negotiations with Matthew, and we also observed this kind of interaction as the children learned to write. It took two forms. One was in the classroom routines which support and sustain writing—storytelling and sharing of reactions that precede writing, the sharing of drafts in conference with teacher and peers, and the sharing of final drafts with the entire class when the young writer takes a turn in the "author's chair."

One example of this negotiation in action comes from the same inner city class. The teacher, Mrs. Kennedy, began every morning by reading to the children. Because so many of the children had limited proficiency in English, it might be expected that a discussion of the story might be problematic. Also, such discussions might easily either disintegrate into repetitious observation, or, conversely, turn into comprehension tests in which the teacher asks questions and the children take turns answering them. Neither was the case here. For the first few days at the beginning of the year, once Mrs. Kennedy had finished reading the story, she would ask the children what they liked about the story. After

that, she would tell them what she liked and then she would continue with a sentence such as, "While I was reading the story, I wondered. . ." or "I like that, too, but I wonder. . ." It was only a few days before the children took charge of their own discussions, but they framed it in the "I likes" and the "I wonders" which they had adopted from their teacher. It is important, we think, to note that the teacher did not instruct the children in the "I like. . ." and "I wonder. . ." frame. To do so might have achieved the same end, *outwardly*, but the children would not have been part of the negotiation, for there would not have been one; they would have surrendered some of the small amount of control they have of their own learning.

The second kind of negotiation occurs in the actual framing of the story. The way in which a story is shaped and told is very much a matter of negotiation. The transcript of the interaction between two boys working on a story illustrates such negotiation. While Andrew and Sam discuss Sam's story of the nativity, Andrew takes the opportunity to give Sam a lesson in audience awareness:

- Andrew: How did Mary and Joseph get to Bethlehem?
Sam: On a donkey, I guess.
Andrew: You didn't say so.
Sam: Why should I?
Andrew: 'Cause people will wonder 'bout how they took all those, uh foods. . .
Sam: Groceries.
Andrew: Yeah, groceries, they bought. They'll wonder how they carried them AND how they got Mary to Bethlehem for Jesus to be borned.
Sam: I don't think so.
Andrew: Well, I do. You said they bought apples, and oranges, and bread and cheese and then they went to Bethlehem. You should say how they got there.
Sam: Oh, who cares!
Andrew: I do and Mrs. Kennedy cares, too!

In this exchange, Andrew was not only instructing Sam in the requirements of an audience, he was negotiating with Sam the "expectable way of doing things." That the negotiation was successful was apparent in Sam's final draft in which he provided Mary with a donkey, a saddle and two saddle bags to get her and her groceries to Bethlehem.

JOINT CONSTRUCTION OF A SHARED WORLD OF EXPERIENCE

The mutual negotiation of the experiences shared by teacher and pupils is perhaps the most important aspect of learning. It is at the very heart of what schooling *should* be about, for *all* children, but most especially for children for whom the culture both inside and outside the school is somewhat alien to begin with. One way of making the school setting less formidable is for the teacher to construct jointly with the children a new world or sphere of experience. This is what teacher and pupils were doing in the preceding examples and during most of the time we observed the classes. In these classes, the teachers were not “instructors”—imparters of knowledge—so much as they were partners with the children in creating the schooling experience anew. To quote Lindfors: “Sharing a world of experience and drawing on that in interaction with others is basic to all interaction. . .” (1987, 208). We would add that the joint negotiation of the business of language learning through sharing—of stories, of the experiences of writing and of living in the classroom and out—creates the community of language learners so vital to the language learning process. It is this mutual negotiation which, we believe, contributed to the success of the two classes we observed by creating a community of children receptive to and supportive of one another’s efforts as language learners and language users.

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NOTE

¹These samples of conversation were gathered in conjunction with the thesis work of S. Horobin (The University of Calgary, 1989).

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