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Introduction

Background to the study

There is widespread agreement amongst observers about what were the essential characteristics of interactions in schools for black people in South Africa under the former apartheid system: highly centralised, with teachers adopting authoritarian roles and doing most of the talking, with few pupil initiations, and with most of the pupil responses taking the form of group chorusing. Schlemmer and Bot (1986: 80) report a senior African school inspector as stating that black pupils were discouraged from asking questions or participating actively in learning and explain that it was regarded as impolite and even insubordinate to ask questions or make suggestions in class. Thembela (1986: 41) refers to classroom practice being characterised by rote learning and teacher-centred instruction.

Most observers, moreover, agree that the educational consequences of such interaction styles were unfortunate. Schlemmer and Bot (1986) and Thembela (1986), for example, argue that the use of such styles oppressed creativity, initiative and assertiveness. MacDonald (1988) claims that there are aspects of metacognition and disembedded thinking crucial to advanced learning and to effective functioning in a technological society which these styles of interacting and learning did not promote.

I became very aware of the possible negative educational consequences of the overwhelming preference for such styles of interaction in schools for black people in South Africa, through my involvement with in-service teacher education projects which had, as one of their primary objectives, the fostering of communicative approaches to the teaching of English in KwaZulu schools. (KwaZulu was a patchwork of geographical areas on the eastern seaboard of South Africa which, in terms of apartheid policy, was designated a ‘homeland’ for Zulu people. At the
time of the study reported here, the total population of native speakers of Zulu was almost seven million; they thus constituted the largest language group in South Africa. Zulu speakers live in many parts of South Africa, but at that time approximately five million of them lived in KwaZulu.)

A number of the implementors of the in-service teacher education projects complained about the reluctance of many of the teachers, and even some of the students, to adopt the more egalitarian, de-centralised ways of interacting associated with these approaches to language teaching. This reluctance was pervasive enough to make at least some of those involved with the in-service projects, including myself, question whether the choice of communicative language teaching as a goal was an appropriate one. Given that communicative language teaching approaches had their origins chiefly in Europe and the USA, contexts very different from those which obtained in KwaZulu, I began to wonder whether our choice of communicative language teaching as a goal was possibly a sort of naive ethnocentricism prompted by the thought that what is good for Europe or the USA had to be good for KwaZulu. I reasoned that, in order to discover whether the goal of communicative language teaching was appropriate or not, it would be necessary to discover why students and teachers in KwaZulu schools found it so difficult to transfer to styles compatible with communicative language teaching. With this goal in mind, I encouraged Marianne Claude – who, under my supervision, was engaged in action research/in-service education with teachers in a peri-urban area of KwaZulu – to collect, by means of participant observation, interviews and discussions with the teachers, relevant ethnographic data, including classroom interactional data. I supplemented this with my own participant observation and discussions with teachers during visits to classrooms elsewhere in KwaZulu. In this chapter, I report on my analysis and interpretation of some of this data.

My thinking at this stage was heavily influenced by the findings of research I had completed earlier, working within the interactional sociolinguistic framework developed by scholars such as Gumperz (see, for example, 1982a, 1982b) and Erickson (see, for example, 1975 and 1976). In analysing interethnic encounters between a white South African English-speaking academic and Zulu graduate students at the University of Natal (see Chick 1984) I had identified putative culturally-specific Zulu-English interactional styles. These styles are characterised, amongst other things, by the preference by higher status speakers in asymmetrical encounters (i.e., those in which there are marked differences in the relative status of the participants) for what Scollon and Scollon (1983) term solidarity politeness, including the politeness or face-preserving strategy of volubility (much talking), and by lower status speakers for what they term deference politeness, including the strategy of taciturnity (avoidance of talking). I hypothesised that KwaZulu teachers and students found it difficult to transfer to styles compatible with communicative language teaching because these styles, which call on students to be voluble, differ markedly from those which predominate in a wide range of domains within the Zulu-speaking community, and which are transferred to their use of English in academic and other settings.

Incidentally, to avoid misinterpretation, I need to clarify that I am using ‘preference’ not in its lay sense of speaker’s or hearer’s individual preferences. Rather, I am borrowing a technical term from ethnomethodology, a branch of sociology concerned with investigating how people organise and make sense of social activities. As Levinson (1983: 307) explains, ‘preference’ is not a psychological notion but a structural notion that corresponds closely to the linguistic concept of markedness, according to which certain linguistic features are more basic and conventional and occur more frequently (‘unmarked’) than other features (referred to as ‘marked’). Thus, when Zulus who have relatively low status choose deferential politeness, it is not because they like behaving deferentially, or that they ‘feel’ deferential, but rather because such behaviour is conventional, or as Lakoff expresses it, ‘targeted’. She explains (1979: 69) that each culture has implicitly in its collective mind a concept of how a good human being should behave: ‘a target for its members to aim at and judge themselves and others by’.

Organisation of the study

Most research reports imply that the research which they are reporting on proceeded in very orderly and logical ways, and that the researchers, from the outset, were more knowledgeable and insightful than they actually were. The false starts, the partial understandings and the dead ends do not feature. In this chapter I will be departing from this tradition, and sharing with my readers the often tortuous paths I followed in exploring the significance of interactional styles widely employed in schools for black people in South Africa.

To begin with, I report on my micro-ethnographic analysis of an episode in a lesson in a KwaZulu classroom. The general goal of micro-ethnographic analysis is to provide a description of how interlocutors set up or constitute contexts that allow them to make sense of one another’s messages. My specific purpose was to try to establish why teachers and students in such classrooms found it difficult to transfer to styles compatible with communicative language teaching. The analysis reveals
interactional behaviour consistent with the putative Zulu-English interactional styles identified in the interethnic encounters referred to above. More significantly, it reveals that such styles served valuable social functions for students and teachers alike. This could account for why teachers and students were reluctant to abandon such styles, despite the fact that the academic consequences of such preference were probably unfortunate.

I then explain how my growing awareness of the limitations of micro-ethnographic research in general, and explanations of pervasive school failure amongst dominated groups in terms of culturally-specific interactional styles in particular, prompted me to re-examine my classroom interactional data. Critics have pointed out that micro-ethnographic studies often take insufficient account of how pervasive values, ideologies and structures in the wider society (macro context) constrain what takes place at a micro level. Accordingly, I give an account of the historical, structural circumstances which contributed to making primary school education for most teachers and students in so-called black education in apartheid South Africa such a traumatic experience. Finally I offer a reinterpretation of the analysed data. I suggest that what is most significantly displayed in this episode is not culturally-specific Zulu interactional styles, but styles consistent with interactional norms which teachers and students interactionally constituted as a means of avoiding the oppressive and demeaning effects of apartheid ideology and structures. Following McDermott and Tylbor (1987) I see the teacher and her students as colluding in preserving their dignity by hiding the fact that little or no learning is taking place. While serving the short-term interests of teachers and students, such strategies, I suggest, contributed to the widely documented high failure rate in black education in apartheid South Africa, and made teachers and students resistant to educational innovation. The strategies thus served to reinforce and reproduce the inequalities between the various population groups which characterised apartheid society.

Culturally-specific interactional styles as barriers to innovation and learning

With the goal, then, of trying to establish why many teachers and students in KwaZulu schools resisted the adoption of egalitarian, decentralised ways of interacting, I carried out a fine-grained micro-ethnographic analysis of an episode in a video-recorded mathematics lesson, initially with the help of Marianne Claude (who had observed the lesson while it was taking place) and, later, independently. I selected this episode from the corpus collected by Marianne Claude because it contains features that I had observed in many lessons taught by teachers who were highly regarded either by students or by school authorities in the KwaZulu educational system. In other words, I chose part of a ‘good’ lesson. I did this to ensure that I would be analysing conventional ‘targeted’ behaviour in Lakoff’s sense. I chose a content subject rather than an English lesson so as to lessen the chance that the teacher’s style might have been influenced by Marianne Claude’s intervention.

I based the analysis on methods developed by interactional sociolinguists (see, for example, Gumperz 1982a) who, rather than impose their own categories, attempt to access the interpretative or inferential processes of the participants by repeatedly playing the video or sound recordings to the participants and/or informants who share their cultural backgrounds, and by eliciting interpretations from them about progressively finer details of the discourse. I make use of transcription conventions which highlight the nature of turn exchange and which provide information about the supra-segmental phonology of the episode. Latch marks [ ] are used to show smooth exchange of turns without overlap, while square brackets are used to signify simultaneous speech ( [ ] ). Underlining is used to signify phonological prominence such as stress or marked pitch movement. The ‘shape’ of the pitch movement is indicated above the part of the utterance where this occurs, and so (’) signifies rising tone.

Relevant contextual information is that the class consisted of 38 students of both sexes who were native speakers of Zulu, whose average age at the time was fourteen years, and who were in their seventh year of schooling (the fourth year of the Senior Primary phase). The teacher, whom I shall refer to as Mrs Gumbi, also a native Zulu speaker, was 32 years of age and had completed ten years of schooling and two years of teacher training. Mrs Gumbi conducted the entire lesson from the front of the classroom, making considerable use of the board. The students were crowded into multiple-seat wooden desks arranged in rows facing the board. The lesson took place through the medium of English. (In KwaZulu schools English served as the medium of instruction across the curriculum after the first four years of schooling through the medium of Zulu.)

As the video-recording shows, the focus of the lesson was ‘elements which form the union set’. At the start of the lesson Mrs Gumbi introduced the notion of elements of a union set with the aid of the board. Elements were written on the board, and common elements pointed to. She individually nominated one student to answer a question but, significantly, only after the information to be provided had been
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written on the board. The few other student responses took the form of teacher-initiated group chorusing.

The lesson continued:

1 Mrs Gumbi: but I know that these two elements are common
2 because they are found in set B as well as in set C do you get
3 that
4 Students: yes
5 Mrs Gumbi: now let us form the universal set the
6 union set which
7 has the elements of both sets it B and C
8 Students: C
9 Mrs Gumbi: collect
10 the elements of those two sets and write them together
11 all them they will form union set
12 Students: set
13 Mrs Gumbi: you try to try to list
14 the elements of the union set
15 Student A: three
16 Mrs Gumbi: that is two
17 Student A: three
18 Mrs Gumbi: three
19 Student A: four
20 Mrs Gumbi: four
21 Student A: five
22 Mrs Gumbi: five
23 Student A: six
24 Mrs Gumbi: six
25 Student A: seven
26 Mrs Gumbi: seven
27 Student A: eight
28 Mrs Gumbi: and eight ... Students:
29 what type of set is this now ... it is union set
30 Students: union set
31 Mrs Gumbi: let us try to form one
32 union set because we have been listing now at the elements
33 of set B together with the elements of set C
34 Students: C
35 Mrs Gumbi: to form one
36 set which called what ... a union set
37 Students: set
38 Mrs Gumbi: but remember
39 when you list the union set the elements for or for the union set
40 do not repeat those elements which are written twice do you get that
41 Students: yes
42 Mrs Gumbi: do not repeat them list them once OK
43 Students: yes
44 Mrs Gumbi: you understand this
45 Students: yes
46 Mrs Gumbi: you understand this
47 Students: yes

Culturally-specific interactional styles

What is immediately striking about this episode (as also the lesson as a whole) is the coincidence of teacher volubility and student (particularly individual student) taciturnity, characteristics of interactions in the formerly segregated schools for black people in South Africa, which, as I noted above, have been commented upon by many observers. Mrs Gumbi in this extract, as elsewhere in the lesson, does most of the talking. Indeed, of the total 19 minutes duration of the whole, five seconds short of 16 minutes consists of teacher talk. Also the students’ opportunities to talk (with one or two exceptions) are reduced to group chorusing.

Volubility on the part of the teacher, which Scollon and Scollon (1983) regard as a solidarity strategy, and taciturnity on the part of the students, which they regard as a deference strategy, is consistent with the culturally-specific interactional styles I had found evidence for in my analysis of interethnic encounters between Zulu-English speakers and South African (white) English speakers (Chick 1985). This finding might, therefore, be seen as lending credence to the notion that the interactional styles employed in KwaZulu classrooms were similar to those used in a wide range of domains within the Zulu-speaking community.

A problem for this interpretation is that teacher volubility and student taciturnity have been shown to be characteristic of classroom discourse in many parts of the world including white, middle class European (see, for example, Sinclair and Coulthard 1975) and USA classrooms (see, for example, Mehan 1979). Indeed Ellis (1987: 87) suggests that teacher-centred instruction, which has been so pervasive in black education in South Africa, is derived from classroom practices common in pre-war European schools. An equally, if not more plausible interpretation, is that teacher volubility and student taciturnity are features of institution-specific rather than culturally-specific discourse. According to this interpretation, the source of teacher volubility and student taciturnity is the asymmetrical distribution of social power and knowledge between teachers and students evident in educational institutions throughout the world.

What is not found, however, in classroom discourse throughout the world is the chorusing behaviour evident in this episode, which is why I
chose to focus on it in my analysis. Closer examination revealed that two kinds of cues to chorusing are provided by Mrs Gumbi. The one kind of cue involves the use of a set of yes/no questions: ‘do you understand this?’ (lines 44 and 46); ‘do you get that?’ (lines 2–3 and 40); ‘OK’ (line 42); ‘isn’t it?’ and ‘do you see that?’; ‘can I go on?’ (elsewhere in the lesson). The second kind of cue involves the use of rising tone on accented syllables (e.g., lines 7, 11, 29, 33, 36). This cue is also used as a prompt to individual student responses in a sequence (lines 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26 etc.). What this suggests is the operation of a relatively simple prosodic system in which a restricted set of prosodic cues is used for a wide range of prosodic functions. Interestingly, this observation is consistent with my finding in a study of interethnic encounters (see Chick 1985) that Zulu-English speakers rely less than do white South African English speakers on prosodic cues to signal (together with kinesic, paralinguistic, lexical and syntactic cues) the relationship between different parts of the text, the relative importance of information units, speaker transition points and so on. This may be related to the fact that the prosody of Zulu, a tone language, is very different from that of English.

The closer examination of the chorusing behaviour in this episode points to a possible explanation for the difficulty which teachers and students in KwaZulu schools have in transferring from the putative culturally-specific Zulu-English styles (of which the system of prosodic cues is apparently a distinctive feature) to styles compatible with communicative language teaching. I examined, first, the possibility that the chorusing elicited by the one kind of cue (rising tone), in certain cases, serves the academic function of reinforcing certain key information items and, perhaps, helping the students to become more familiar with (to memorise?) technical terms (e.g., lines 29–30). However, further analysis revealed that it is often not new information that students are asked to choruse; but information already available to the students before the lesson (e.g., in lines 12 and 37 the students are required to supply the word SET rather than the name of the set that they have learnt about in the lesson). Elsewhere in the lesson the rising tone prompts them merely to complete words (e.g., intersection; we are looking for the unKNOWN). The fact that the information value of items chorused is often low prompted me to investigate the possibility that the primary function of the chorusing elicited by this kind of cue is social rather than academic.

I also examined the possibility that the chorusing elicited by the other kind of cue (the set of questions) serves the academic function of enabling Mrs Gumbi to access the level of her students’ understanding so that she can know whether or not to recycle her explanation at a lower level of abstraction. However, I discovered that the chorused responses are without exception ‘yes’. This suggests that the questions are not really open questions, and that their function is to signal participation rather than level of understanding, i.e. it is again social rather than academic in purpose.

The social function of chorusing became even more clearly evident when I examined the lesson as a whole. I discovered that the students are required, in response to both kinds of cue, to provide mainly confirmative one- or two-word responses, or responses which repeat information on the board or information which has been recycled again and again by Mrs Gumbi. This suggests that chorusing gives the students opportunities to participate in ways that reduce the possibility of the loss of face associated with providing incorrect responses to teacher elicitations, or not being able to provide responses at all. It is interesting to note that the chorusing is more evident at the beginning of the lesson than later on. Once responses have been well rehearsed, so that the chance of being wrong publicly is reduced, more individual responses are elicited, and at the end students are even invited to leave their desks and carry out the very public act of writing their responses on the board.

There is, of course, nothing unusual about teachers needing to resort to face-saving strategies, since the asymmetrical role relations between teachers and students to be found in most parts of the world ensure that the risk of face-threat is great. As Cazden (1979; 147) explains, ‘teachers, by the very nature of their professional role, are continuously threatening both aspects of their students’ face constraining their freedom of action; evaluating, often negatively, a high proportion of student acts and utterances; and often interrupting student work and student talk’. To reduce this risk, teachers employ face-saving strategies such as expressing directives indirectly by means of interrogatives, e.g. ‘Can you open your books, please?’ This strategy reduces the sense of imposition associated with the directive by suggesting that the students are free to decide whether or not to comply. However, the need to resort to face-saving strategies is particularly great in KwaZulu classrooms because the asymmetry in the relative status of teachers and students is marked. This reflects the marked asymmetry in the relative status of adults and children in the wider community. According to Marianne Claude’s informants (see Chick and Claude 1985), an adult in that community has the right to ask any child, who may well be a stranger, to do errands for them (i.e. take a message to someone; buy something at the shop) and may even chastise a child not their own.

Another striking feature of this episode is the remarkably rhythmic manner in which teacher and students synchronise their verbal and prosodic behaviours, particularly in accomplishing the chorusing
sequences. Context analysts (e.g., Schefflin 1973; Condon 1977; Kendon 1973, 1979; McDermott, Gospodinoff and Aaron 1978) have demonstrated that participants in conversations organise their behaviours in co-operative, reciprocal, rhythmically co-ordinated ways in signalling to one another and negotiating the context of their talk. This enables them to make sense of what it is that they are doing together. In the episode such interactional synchrony is possible, presumably, because the teacher and her students are able to draw on their shared, implicit knowledge of the discourse conventions associated with conventional interactional styles. I suggest that this synchrony contributes to the perception that purposeful activity and learning are taking place.

To sum up, the micro-ethnographic analysis of this episode reveals interactional behaviour consistent with Zulu-English interactional styles identified in a study of interethnic encounters (see Chick 1985). Particularly noteworthy features of the discourse are the chorusing behaviour and the remarkably rhythmic manner in which the participants synchronise their interactional behaviours in accomplishing the chorusing sequences. Analysis revealed that these putative styles serve social rather than academic functions. For example, they help the students to avoid the loss of face associated with being wrong in a public situation, and provide them with a sense of purpose and accomplishment. Something not examined here, but equally important, is that these styles also help teachers avoid the loss of face associated with displays of incompetence. This is because they ensure that the lesson develops along predetermined lines, and that the opportunities for students to raise issues and problems that teachers may not be competent to handle are few. It is for such reasons that I refer to discourse associated with these styles as ‘safe-talk’.

What this analysis suggests is that the task of making a transition from the culturally-preferred interactional styles employed conventionally in KwaZulu classrooms to the styles associated with the more egalitarian relationships required by the communicative language teaching approach was likely to be fraught with risk for both teachers and students. They all resisted innovation because they had vested interests in the maintenance of ‘safe-talk’.

Limitations of explanations of school failure in terms of culturally-specific styles

One of the advantages of doing sociolinguistic research within the context of apartheid South Africa was that one was constantly prompted to reconsider one’s interpretations. Many scholars in this context were very suspicious of sociolinguistic research which had an ethnographic orientation, and indeed of ethnography in general. As Kuper, writing during the apartheid era, explained, ‘almost by its very nature, ethnographic research may appear to provide some support for the ideological assumptions underpinning apartheid, notably the belief that “traditional” and “tribal” institutions remain viable, and command respect’ (1985:1). It was in part the negative reaction of such critics to my analysis and interpretation of the episode referred to above which prompted the reinterpretation outlined below.

Another advantage of researching within the context of apartheid South Africa was that the discriminatory legislation tended to make visible what is normally hidden in democratic societies, namely the mechanisms in the wider (macro) society through which groups and individuals exercise power and deny it to others. It was the visibility of these mechanisms that had prompted me in an earlier study (see Chick 1985) to try to account for how macro-level factors, such as segregation, constrain what takes place at a micro level of interethnic communication. I was, therefore, open to the suggestion that a limitation of my original analysis of the episode was that I had not adequately contextualised my data; that I had not taken sufficient account of the effect on classroom discourse of such factors as the differential funding of the racially segregated school systems, differential teacher-student ratios, levels of teacher training and so on.

I was also familiar with the claim of such critics of micro-ethnography as Singh, Lele and Martohardjono (1988) that, because micro-ethnographers fail to show how the pervasive values, ideologies and structures of the wider society constrain micro-level behaviour, they come perilously close to being apologists for the systems they are investigating. Along similar lines, Karabel and Halsey (1977: 58) are critical of the neglect of macro factors in interactional accounts of the pervasive school failure of minority groups. They point out that:

Teachers and pupils do not come together in a historical vacuum: the weight of precedent conditions the outcome of ‘negotiation’ over meaning at every turn. If empirical work is confined to observation of classroom interaction, it may miss the process by which political and economic power set sharp bounds to what is negotiable.

Ogbu (1981), too, while not denying that micro-ethnographic studies have a role in explaining how interaction acts as an immediate cause of a particular child’s failure, argues that it is essential also to study how these classroom events are built up by forces emanating from outside these micro settings.

Influenced by such thinking, I concluded that my micro-ethnographic
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The macro context of schooling for black people in apartheid South Africa

As most people are aware, apartheid, an Afrikaans word meaning literally ‘apartheid’ or separateness, refers to the policy of the Nationalist Party, which, subsequent to its coming to power in 1948, was implemented as a massive programme of social engineering. Racial segregation had been a feature of South African society ever since the arrival of whites in the 17th century. However, after 1948, segregation on racial and even, within racial groups, on ethnic lines, in every sphere of life, was implemented on a scale unprecedented in human history. Not merely were separate institutions such as educational institutions established for different race and ethnic groups, but geographical separation was attempted through the creation of ethnic ‘homelands’, of which KwaZulu was one.

Exemplifying as it does the classic divide-and-rule strategy, the apartheid policy admirably served the goal of the Nationalist Party of consolidating and increasing the newly-won hegemony of Afrikaner-dom. Segregation also served to maintain and increase the privileged status that whites had enjoyed since the 17th century, by facilitating the systematic discrimination against people of colour.

In education, systematic discrimination was evident in the differential per capita expenditure on education for the various population groups. Towards the end of the apartheid era, there were attempts by the government to narrow the gaps between the provision for the various groups. However, as recently as the financial year 1986/7, the per capita expenditure on education for whites was R528. That for blacks (i.e. Africans rather than Asians or so-called ‘coloureds’) was only R476, whilst that for blacks in the homelands was still lower; for example, in KwaZulu it was only R459 (South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) Survey 1987/88).

One of the consequences of this differential expenditure, which probably played a role in determining what styles of interaction were possible, was differential teacher-student ratios. In 1987, whereas the student-teacher ratio for whites was 16 to 1, that for blacks in so-called white areas was 41 to 1, and for KwaZulu primary schools 53 to 1 and KwaZulu secondary schools 37 to 1 (SAIRR Survey 1987/88). It is very difficult for teachers, who are responsible for large numbers of students and who usually have to cope with overcrowded classrooms, to facilitate more egalitarian, decentralised ways of interacting.

The more long-term discriminatory effects of segregated education were evident, also, in the differential levels of professional qualification of teachers in schools for the various population groups. According to Du Plessis, Du Pisani and Plekker (1989) whereas, in 1989, 100% of teachers in schools for whites were professionally qualified in the sense of having at least matriculation or higher academic qualifications, as well as a teachers’ certificate or diploma, only 25% of teachers in black primary schools and 10% in black secondary schools were professionally qualified.

Of particular relevance to the constraints of macro factors upon classroom discourse is another factor, namely, how apartheid ideology was translated into language medium policy in black education. Hartshorne (1987) reports that, until the Nationalists came to power, the position of English as sole medium of instruction after the first few years of schooling was unchallenged. He reports, further, that the Nationalists:

made of Afrikaans a symbol of exclusiveness and separateness, and the struggle for Afrikaans became part of the “mission” to control and rule South Africa. In education this expressed itself in a commitment to separate schools and rigid mother-tongue education policy. (Hartshorne 1987: 88)

This commitment eventually translated into mother-tongue instruction in primary education with English and Afrikaans as compulsory subjects from the first year of schooling, and with both Afrikaans and English as media of instruction in secondary education (half the subjects through English and half through Afrikaans). It was the inflexible and doctrinaire implementation of this policy, and the deafness to the protests of the black community, that sparked the Soweto uprising of 1976. This spread to the rest of the country, almost assuming the proportions of a
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full-scale civil war. As a consequence of the conflict, the government was forced to concede to the black community the right to choose either English or Afrikaans as medium in the high schools. In response to further pressure from the community, this right to choose was extended to the higher primary phase. English became overwhelmingly the chosen medium in black education after the first three years of schooling. In 1988, for example, only 25 primary schools (including some very small farm schools) and no high schools used Afrikaans as medium (SAIRR 1988/89).

Though the choice of English as medium represented the will of the people, as MacDonald (1990) explains, in primary education at least, it added to the burdens of teachers and students. She points out (1990: 39) that the apartheid system ensured that most of the teachers in so-called black education did not speak English with confidence or fluency, used outmoded materials, and had almost no contact with English speakers. Also, following the major shift to English as medium in primary education from 1979 onwards, no changes were made to the syllabus for English to prepare the ground linguistically, and conceptually for its use across the curriculum. As a consequence, black primary school students were not adequately prepared for the sudden transition to English in the fourth year of schooling concurrently with the curriculum broadening into ten subjects. Nor were most of the teachers equipped to explain effectively in English the new concepts in the various content subjects such as mathematics.

MacDonald and her fellow researchers found that there was a considerable gap between the English competence required for the reading of content subject textbooks in the fourth year of schooling, and the English competence that might have been expected if a student had benefited optimally from English as a second language teaching materials then used in junior primary schools. They also found that there was also a very large gap between this hypothesised optimal competence and the level of competence students actually reached. They estimated, for example, that the vocabulary requirements in English increased by 1000% in the fourth year of schooling. They calculated that a student who had learnt optimally from the ESL materials in the junior primary phase might have encountered not more than half the vocabulary, and might have been unfamiliar with syntactic elements in up to 60% of sentences in science textbooks used in the fourth year of schooling. Moreover they might have been so ignorant of the conventions of expository writing as to experience what is referred to as ‘register shock’ when reading those texts.

As a consequence, the fourth year of schooling was a time of trauma for both teachers and students; a trauma reflected in the high drop-out rate in black schools at the end of that year (64,100 or 8.9% of the total outflow in 1987 according to the SAIRR Report 1988/89). The researchers found that the effect of those conditions was what they termed ‘the loss of meaning’. ‘The children are likely to be alienated by what they have to learn, and only dimly perceive the implications and linkages between the concepts they are presented with’ (MacDonald 1990: 141). Faced with these odds, teachers tended to resort to providing notes that the students were required to memorise. This gave the impression of real learning taking place, but as MacDonald (1990: 143) points out, the students often learnt what they did not understand, and were usually unable to use what they had learnt because this mode of education did not allow the integration of new information with what had been learnt before.

A reinterpretation: safe-talk as the outcome of collusion between teachers and students

Reexamining my micro-ethnographic analysis of the episode in a mathematics lesson in a KwaZulu classroom, I was struck by the similarity between MacDonald’s account of the teachers’ response to the trauma experienced in the early years of senior primary schooling and my interpretation of the interactional behaviour in the episode as ‘safe-talk’.

My thinking was also strongly influenced by two studies that attempt to trace the relationship between the structure of classroom discourse and the macro context in which it occurs, including the ideologies that are promoted in them. In the first of these studies, Collins (1987) argues that the ideology of ability grouping promoted in school systems in the United States leads students in low ability groups and their teachers to socialise one another into systematic departures from the norms of classroom discourse. Behaviour consistent with these ‘emergent’ norms (see Mehan 1979: 90) interferes with the reading practice which members of these groups so badly need. Collins argues, further, that the ideology of prescriptivism also promoted in the United States school system results in evaluation being made on the basis of cultural background rather than on academic aptitude. This leads to the systematic exclusion of minority students from opportunities to learn and practise forms of literary discourse.

In the second of these studies, McDermott and Tylbor (1987) analyse an episode in which teachers and students do interactional work to make the illiteracy of one of the students, Rosa, not noticeable. In the process Rosa does not get a turn to practise her reading. They show that while evaluation is constantly taking place, teachers and students collude...
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in evaluating overtly only when the evaluation is positive, while, at the same time, making covert, unspoken, negative evaluations. Such collusion hides the unpleasant fact that schooling is structured in such a way as to provide access to opportunities for learning for some students and to deny it to others.

These two studies show how features of the macro context, namely the institutional ideologies and bureaucratic structures, constrain what takes place at a micro level. They also show the participants working together to reshape the structure of their discourse and to socialise one another into a set of sociolinguistic norms that enable them to meet their immediate needs. As Collins (1987: 313) explains:

Institutional ideologies and bureaucratic organisation forms do not entirely constrain participants; people still strive to make sense of their situation, to avoid or resist that which is demeaning or oppressive.

It was these insights that enabled me to recognise that the ‘safe-talk’ which I had identified in my analysis of the episode of the mathematics lesson does not represent the inappropriate use of culturally-specific Zulu-English interactional styles. Rather, it represents styles which the participants interactionally developed and constituted as a means of coping with the overwhelming odds they faced in their segregated schools. I suggest that these styles enabled them to collude in hiding unpleasant realities. Thus, for example, the rhythmically co-ordinated chorusing prompts and responses enabled the teacher and students in the episode to hide their poor command of English; to obscure their inadequate understanding of academic content; and to maintain a façade of effective learning taking place. In this way they were able to preserve their dignity to some extent. In terms of this interpretation, commonalities between ‘safe-talk’ and the putative Zulu-English styles identified in an earlier study (Chick 1985) are features of conventional Zulu interactional styles that survived the process of constituting a new set of norms of interaction. In doing the interactional work involved in constituting these norms, the participants inevitably started by making use of interactional styles most familiar to them.

Unfortunately, as Collins (1987: 313) notes, ‘solutions achieved to local problems may have unforeseen consequences which are quite damaging’. ‘Safe-talk’ has proved to be a barrier both to learning and to educational innovation in South Africa. As such it served to reinforce the inequalities that gave rise to it in the first place.

Conclusion

To sum up, in this chapter I have explored the significance of interactional styles that were widely employed in schools for black people in South Africa. The fine-grained analysis of an episode from a lesson which exemplifies such styles revealed that they served important social functions for teachers, but probably did not promote efficient learning. They also provided support for the hypothesis that teachers and students in KwaZulu classrooms were often reluctant to adopt more egalitarian, decentralised ways of interacting advocated in in-service education because they had vested interests in ‘safe-talk’.

A richer contextualisation of the classroom data in terms of the ideology and structures of the wider apartheid society facilitated a reinterpretation of my findings. According to this reinterpretation, ‘safe-talk’ represents styles consistent with norms of interaction which teachers and students constituted as a means of avoiding the oppressive and demeaning constraints of apartheid educational systems.

One implication of this study is that teaching innovation at the micro level which is not accompanied by appropriate structural change at the macro level is unlikely to succeed. For those like myself who have been engaged in the difficult task of educational innovation within the constraints imposed by the apartheid society, it has been exciting to experience the dismantling of apartheid structures and the assembling of alternative structures. Hopefully, the latter will make it less necessary for teachers and students to engage in ‘safe-talk’.

Note

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References


Safe-talk: Collusion in apartheid education


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