22 Students and 22 Teachers: Socio-Cultural Mediation in the Early Childhood Classroom

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Abstract

It is essential for teachers to provide a setting where student interaction is fostered as a mediational tool for learning, thus expediting the natural transfer of language and knowledge among students (Cummins, 1979). Doing so provides students a way of learning in an additive environment (Soltero, 2004). Could such a classroom have the potential to transform and empower students to feel valued, impacting their cognitive and self-identity growth? This reflective paper looks at the experience of one Dual Language Kindergarten class through the lens of socio-cultural mediation (Donato & MacCormick, 1994) while considering the Communities of Practice as a theoretical framework (Wenger, 1998) for Dual Language classrooms. Implications indicate that these classrooms could potentially be communities for transformative pedagogy where interactive practices are developed in a way that advances life-long academic success for Spanish-speaking students and English-speaking students alike.

Introduction

As a teacher I believe that there is a correlation between socio-cultural mediation (Donato & MacCormick, 1994) and the educational experience of Spanish-speaking students in the classroom. I believe that moving away from traditional roles can impact how a second language learner is valued in the classroom, therefore potentially changing a child's feelings towards language, school, and the learning experience. I feel that it is my responsibility as a teacher to have a positive effect on students in their cognitive, developmental, and self-identity growth. The positive effect is built upon relationships developed in the classroom between the teacher and student and secondly between student and student. In my classroom the socio-cultural mediation of a student's home language and academic language is enacted through the use of workstations as an organizational tool for classroom management, student agency, and purposeful scaffolding because I provide students with as many opportunities as possible to build relationships and to engage with each other through language and learning.

My positionality falls within three roles: teacher, social cultural mediator, and advocate of transformative pedagogy within my classroom. My role within the educational institution as teacher requires me to negotiate myself within the bilingual education arena while maintaining balance among a two-sided rhetoric where the environment calls upon me to mediate two registers and two realities; one, the language of the student and the other, the academic language of the school. Enacting the pedagogy of the chameleon (Machado-Casas, 2009, p. 543) enables me to disguise myself in multiple ways in the classroom, for example, as teacher, student, life-coach, and nurturer; this sort of chameleon work-style is accentuated by the many different cultural and linguistic experiences of my 22 students. With 22 students comes 22 ways of learning and 22 ways of teaching; as a chameleon, I am able to change gears with fluidity in order to meet the individual needs of each of the students (p. 543). I accomplish this fluidity by participating in genuine purposeful dialogue with my students. In doing so, I enact mediation through language for learning and personal growth.

My Role as Dual Language Teacher

I am currently a Kindergarten, Dual Language Teacher at a school in urban San Antonio. In order to envision this particular environment, I give you some background information about the school, teachers, and students. At the school where I teach we follow a 90/10 Two-Way Dual Language Model of instruction, this means that the student population is a mixed population of Spanish-speakers and English-speakers (Soltero, 2004, p. 6). This mixed population of students begins their educational experience functioning in Spanish 90% of the time while experiencing literacy in Spanish first, eventually moving to 50% of the time in Spanish and 50% of

the time in English by third grade. In the Dual Language classroom, at this school, reading and writing is taught in Spanish first for both Spanish and English speakers. Although reading and writing are explicitly taught in English beginning in the 2nd grade, teachers in Kindergarten and First Grade expose the students to English literacy during science and social studies class by modeling the language orally and through the reading and writing format. The school is a Bilingual Cluster campus which means that students who are labeled as Limited English Proficient (LEP) are bussed to our campus for bilingual services from other schools in the nearby neighborhood.

This school offers two types of Bilingual Education: Dual Language and Transitional Bilingual Education for English Language Learners. In this Dual Language program all students are taught math and literacy in Spanish by a teacher who will only speak in Spanish, making it a Spanish immersion environment. Science, Social Studies, Art, Music, Computers, Physical Education, Counselors, and Library time are taught in English by a different teacher who only speaks English. Some are confused by the needs of the Spanish-speaking students, which is evident throughout the institution; many question the use of Spanish as a tool for learning. I feel that if teachers do not shift their traditional pedagogy, then Spanish-speaking students are missing out on valuable lessons and relationships that could be formed with the teacher (Freire, 2000). The typical student population of my class consists of ten English-speakers (who come from various ethnic backgrounds including Latino, African American, and White) and twelve Spanish-speakers (typically coming from families that maintain connections with relatives from Spanish-speaking countries). Four of the Spanish-speakers and two of the English-speakers are fairly bilingual, these students act as language brokers; all of the students are either five or six years old. Each grade level provides a Spanish model teacher and an English model teacher. The Spanish model teachers, when with their homeroom class –– which is in the Dual Language classroom, only speak Spanish. The English model teacher comes to the Dual Language classroom during the designated instructional English time and speaks only English.

At our school, in Kindergarten the instructional English time is during science and social studies. If the students approach the teacher during instructional Spanish time in English, the teacher asks the student to repeat in Spanish. If the student does not know how to communicate their thoughts in Spanish, the teacher will offer vocabulary choices or will ask the student to ask a friend, thus empowering the helping student to become the language expert. This is also the case during English time, if a student approaches the teacher in Spanish the teacher will ask the student to repeat in English. The reason we chose to do things this way is because we feel that, for many of the students, the only opportunity to speak Spanish may be at school. Outside the classroom the students are faced with a society that is typically English-speaking. Antonia, Darder, and Torres (2014) discuss addressing the growing needs of Latino students in educational settings and that we must link their needs with the ways that "structural dimensions shape daily institutional life" (p. 11). In order to address the meta-structure in place in schools we need to look at what happens in places around the school such as the cafeteria, the playground, meetings with the counselors, Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, field day, morning announcements, etc. Although seemingly harmless areas of schools, the reality is such that if a student does not speak the language of the school, which is English, they will be at a huge disadvantage being left out of activities and missing out on important messages that inform and educate. I am not saying that this school should switch to Spanish as the language of the school, but language equity should be evident throughout a school that is a Bilingual (English and Spanish) Cluster school so that those who do not speak English can feel part of the structural dimensions that shape the institutional life of the school and can survive by having access to the school community through a language that they understand.

Our program was initiated in 2009 and the first cohort is currently in the 4th grade. Prior to implementation, we researched Dual Language models for 2 years. We visited many Dual Language classrooms across Texas, California, New Mexico, Colorado, and Louisiana; we realized that although it was called Dual Language, each school's program was organized differently. We read countless books and were privileged to attend La Cosecha in New Mexico, BEEMS –– Bilingual Education Emphasizing Multicultural Settings at the University of Texas in El Paso, NABE –– National Association of Bilingual Educators in Texas, Colorado, and Louisiana, TABE –– Texas Association of Bilingual Educators, SAAABE –– San Antonio Area Association of Bilingual Educators, and The Texas Region 20 Dual Language Conference. This privilege has sustained a continuous flow of new information enabling us to continue to learn how to facilitate classrooms with diverse populations. While at Dual Language

conferences I began to hear about the use of workstations with the purpose of utilizing students as peer teachers. When discussing interaction among students, Collier and Thomas (2004) report that in a classroom community if students become peer teachers, they feel valued and respected as equal partners in the learning process. This strategy began to make sense to me in my role as a teacher. I recognized the need to expand my role to include that of a mediator. I have found that when I participate in purposeful dialogue with my students and facilitate, rather than control student learning, the learning environment is transformed into a community for deep cognitive skills (Howard, Sugarman, Christian, Lindholm-Leary, & Rogers, 2007).

My Role as Social Cultural Mediator

In my classroom socio-cultural mediation is enacted through the use of workstations, student agency, and purposeful scaffolding. In order to do this I get to know my students through personal dialogue which enables me to familiarize with their prior knowledge and socio-cultural and socio-linguistic experiences (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005); this interaction enables me to construct relationships with my students. Understanding that my students have a lot to bring to the educational table, by way of cultural and language capital, I seek out the individual wealth of each of my students. I adjust my teacher lens with each of my students where I focus and re-focus by getting to know each student's academic needs. I do this in order to differentiate lessons and activities to meet their academic goals through culturally responsive teaching practices. Irizarry and Antrop-Gonzalez (2014) look to the work done by Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) and Villegas and Lucas (2002) when they discuss enacting culturally responsive pedagogy, asserting that "culturally responsive teacher practices are contingent on teachers knowing their students well, viewing themselves as agents of social change, and connecting curriculum to students' funds of knowledge" (p. 247). Implementing these teaching practices privileges me to be a multi-situational teacher who can address a variety of student needs and doing so has helped me place value on my students' cultural and linguistic capital; a pedagogy not typical of the traditional classroom. The resulting positive outcomes have led to my interest in initiating a discussion on the shift of traditional roles of teacher and student in the classroom to an understanding that students can take on the role of peer teacher, transforming them into teachers themselves.

I consider myself to be a social cultural mediator because I mediate learning through workstations as a form of classroom management. In this early childhood Dual Language classroom the mediating entity is the language. Here, not only are the students mediating academic concepts but also informal and social concepts where idioms and colloquialism are being exchanged. I manage my class daily by conducting a quick whole group activity to activate prior knowledge of language usually through music or letter games. After we complete the whole group activity the students go to workstations where they work on academic concepts with their peers. Workstations are a key factor when facilitating a classroom mixed with students who speak Spanish and others who speak English. When the students are at workstations, the students become the social cultural mediators. Bound to a common activity, they are essentially forced to interact and therefore come together to share language and knowledge. The interaction enables them to construct new knowledge for themselves and for each other.

I recommend modeling the language and work with the whole group first, then demonstrating what to do and say during work at stations. Students must also learn what to do when it is time to move to the next station. I play classical music during workstations because I feel it adds another layer to the environment, creating a peaceful atmosphere that encourages students to continue working. The music also adds a sense of timing; students know that when the music stops there is a change coming. I have seen that it eases the students giving them a sense of organization, and initiative as they know what to do when the music ends. This leads them to become agents of their actions within the classroom. As a model for transformative pedagogy, small group work as a teaching strategy in reality is not a learning strategy exclusive to the Dual Language setting, this strategy is a good one for any student in any setting; I find it to be an important one because it establishes a routine where you enable your students to manage themselves, know what to expect, and makes for confident students thus "facilitate[ing] linguistic and academic development"(Alanis, 2011, p. 21). Working in small groups offers opportunities for second language learners to engage in interactive learning, peer-teaching, and student

sharing time because "small group discussions might promote exploratory thinking and speech" (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 32). In my classroom, typically "students are learning to speak at least one new language and learning academic content in a second language" (p. 21). Alanis (2011) cites Collier and Thomas (2009) as noting that when students work together they learn academic concepts "through cognitively challenging and interactive lessons or projects" (p. 21).

If we look at the concept of agency through the lens of Socio-cultural Mediation in the Dual Language classroom, we can understand that children can "actively use and respond to the ideas they encounter in educational sites" (Toso, 2012, p. 2). Based on my experiences in the classroom I have found that the easiest way to make this happen is to consider socio-cultural mediation strategies for the early childhood environment as the basis for fostering relationships in the classroom firstly between teacher and student and secondly between student and student. This type of classroom climate produces a particular engagement not typically seen in a traditional classroom allowing for "considerable agency on the part of learners-as-teachers" (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 56). Agency, according to Toso (2012), means that people, and in this case students, have the power to "envision and express [their] identity and take actions to achieve [their] desires and goals" (p. 2). In my classroom this means teaching my students, who are five and six years old, to enact their voice. I teach my students that using their voice means being respectful towards others and yourself when considering personal choices or options while making decisions on learning and behavior within the social structure of the school — but most importantly making my students aware that their voice is tightly linked to their opinions and their voice and actions matter in my classroom.

Building Community through Socio-Cultural Mediation

As a socio-cultural mediator I build a community in my classroom that facilitates the use of cultural and linguistic capital in order to foster the acquisition of a second language whether it be English and academic English for Spanish-speakers or academic English for English-speakers. From the socio-cultural perspective "individuals are ontological constructs of the interactions they participate in within their culture" (Cousin, Diaz , Flores, & Hernandez, 1995, p. 657). In this case, interaction with the purpose for learning takes place in the classroom community. I argue that the traditional role of the teacher must change. Considerations must include not just what you talk about, but also how long you are talking, what artifacts are being used, and where you are positioned within the learning environment. According to Cousin et al. (1995), the everyday experiences and interactions within the community form a child's development (p. 658); each child walks into the classroom with individualized practices learned within their home community prior to coming to the school. The authors go on to explain that "If the socioeducational contexts support and build on the experiences of these children in their homes and communities, then their individual development may continue in a positive way" (p. 658). Teachers have the opportunity to use these experiences and a student's home language in order to help bridge to the mainstream language of the school. When teachers use the home language, we acknowledge their literacy abilities. Flores, Cousin, and Diaz (1991) tell us that we as teachers must be willing to accept that students do come with a particular proficiency that has been socially constructed through their community of practice, and validating this knowledge validates the child (p. 373). Validation promotes encouragement to learn. I have found that giving a student a role, such as peer teacher, in the gives them an automatic sense of worth. Organizing the early childhood classroom in this way appears to build confidence and character, thus facilitating learning through the development of cognitive skills that promote academic achievement.

This type of organization permits the students to ask each other questions and to be good problem solvers. These skills are especially important in a classroom environment using small workstations because it allows for students to make their own decisions. Workstation groups mixed by academic ability and language organize learning in a way that puts the teaching into the hands of the students. With careful organization and observation of what the students are sharing the classroom becomes an environment where I am not the only teacher the students are as well. I act as a facilitator of this environment. I provide the artifacts, manipulatives, and language; the students reinforce the learning through their exchange of language and peer teaching while working at stations. Through observations of my students, I am able to reflect on mediating levels of knowledge.

When reflecting on this I look to the work by Flores et al. (1991). These authors assert that, "The teacher acts as a cultural mediator, organizing the learning in order to mediate levels of knowledge between the teacher and the students and among students themselves" (p. 373). I find that workstations are a way of sharing knowledge because the student work is differentiated by academic skills. For example, I have four workstations in my classroom. During Language Arts our focus is on reading and writing in Spanish. While at Language Arts stations the students build high frequency words with letter cubes based on a list of words that is at their reading level. As the students learn the words, I switch out the old ones and replace with more difficult words, allowing each student to work at the level that is appropriate for them. I teach my students to recognize when others need help so that those who can, help those who are struggling. If we look at the interpretation of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) by Smagorinsky (2011) we understand that all students go through three zones of cognitive development: a student who cannot work alone, a student who can work with help, and a student who can work alone. It is essential that teachers be able to recognize the ZPD because in a socio-culturally mediated classroom, the interaction among the students will help move a student from zone to zone. By getting to know the students' academic needs before they go to workstations the teacher can form groups for optimal learning where mixing the students heterogeneously by those who are more comfortable with the academic concepts and those who are not. A teacher can gain this knowledge by having individual meetings with their students and basic exploratory tests to find out where they are academically.

In a socio-culturally mediated classroom, teachers must recognize the difference in abilities between what the student knows and what the student will learn. Interactive, peer driven teaching and learning will help those students who can work alone collaborate with students who cannot work alone. Smagorinsky (2011) tells us that "Vygotsky's outline of the ZPD occurs solely within the context of a teaching-learning relationship between a pair of people, one more and one less knowledgeable (usually a teacher and child, but also a child and more competent peer)" (p. 51). Pairs of people in a classroom can be made up of teacher and student or student and student. When the student and student are paired for peer teaching, Vygotsky as cited by Smagorinsky claims that learners, when "teaching can evoke and promote their cognitive development" (p. 51). Any classroom organized in a way that implements social cultural mediation is one that maximizes its resources; that capital can be found within the student population. We can see that when students from different learning zones are mixed into heterogeneous groups at workstations a natural interaction emerges: "individuals become proficient learners by engaging in social interactions and experiences under the direction of those more proficient than themselves" (Flores et al., 1991, p. 371).

Advocate for Transformative Pedagogy

I contend that teachers who advocate for transformative pedagogy will find that through socio-cultural mediation students are motivated to take on a more active role in the classroom when they know that the teacher shares in the learning process and that the teacher values the students opinion and voice because the students are influential in the outcome of each activity. A socio-culturally mediated classroom, organized by a teacher who provides students the opportunity to share knowledge through interactive activities will find that learning occurs through teaching others. In Kindergarten we use workstations in order to optimize the interaction. In my classroom interactive activities are characterized by hands on lessons, with manipulatives, which makes learning easier when working in a small group. For example, in groups of five or six students the children will play a matching game where they have to match the upper case letter with the lower case letter or another game where the students match the beginning sound with a picture card. Sharing the details of a drawing with a partner is another example of learning mediated through the use of language. When students work together in the learning process, "they mutually influence one another" (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 53).

With Smagorinsky's (2011) idea of scaffolding, I utilize student peer teachers as a scaffolding tool to influence learning by other students in the classroom. One of the favorite workstations of the students is one where they work in pairs. One student has a list of words that the second student is working on. The student with the list of words has the list because they have already learned the words and will be scaffolding or helping the second student by working with them on words that they are still learning. The student with the list will

call out the words while the second student writes the words and checks for correct spelling. If they notice incorrect spelling they will say "*Piénsalo otra vez* (Think about it again)" and the student writing will erase and start over. This strategy allows both students to be active in the learning process. When discussing the scaffolding, Smagorinsky turns to Dyson's alternative idea of the weaving metaphor; instead of a stiff and rigid classroom structure where there is a "focus on the teacher as [the] expert" (p. 53) she looks at scaffolding as a shared practice where "While the teacher often leads, she remains open to the idea that the student may come up with an approach to learning to which a more impervious 'scaffold' might be insensitive" (p. 53).

Scaffolding also occurs when the students act as language mediators. At the beginning of the school year, those who did not understand the language of the classroom experience a lot of difficulty realizing that they need help. At times, ignoring the teacher came easy because we did not speak the same language, but a teacher must be pro-active in keeping students' attention in order to help them make connections with their language capital. Students of a socio-culturally mediated classroom learn to become language mediators, thus the teacher has access to another form of scaffolding to make meaning of the learning. Language mediators emerge and step up to translate messages without my having to ask because they have developed empathy toward their peers and have learned to judge the linguistic abilities of their peers (Olmedo, 2005, p. 137). Students also know that if they do not understand something they can turn to their neighbor and ask for help. This provides an effective way to empower the students to raise "their metalinguistic and metacommunicative awareness" (p. 150) while also validating the importance of learning a second language. Teaching students to be language mediators can be challenging because in order to be a mediator, students need to be able to recognize others' burdens. However, with time and encouragement from the teacher, Dual Language students begin to realize that some of their peers do not speak English and some do not speak Spanish. Being that my students are five and six years old, the awareness usually occurs after a few months of me asking for the emergent bilinguals to help another. When they develop an understanding of the burden, students take on the role as language mediators by offering help or checking to see if their classmates understand what's going on.

Teaching students to be language mediators has been one of the most beneficial strategies I have found in a Two-Way Dual Language classroom. Students who are aware of their classmate's confusion or misunderstanding of language when instructions are given in Spanish before beginning a task will automatically interpret my instructions into English for the person next to them or just simply state them out loud for everyone to hear. Olmedo (2005) discusses a technique called the Bilingual Echo. In a Two-Way classroom you can expect to find the student population to be a heterogeneous group of Spanish-speaking students and English-speaking students (Soltero, 2004, p. 6). Olmedo (2005) states that "Placing [students] in situations with a diversity of language backgrounds and opportunities for peer interaction facilitates the growth of their proficiency and comprehension" (p. 151). The author describes the bilingual echo explaining "The most common way that children perform as language mediators involves translation of a message" (p. 145). I have taught my students to do two things, either try to figure it out on their own based on what you see is happening as it is happening, or ask a friend for help. One of the fundamental practices of a Two-Way Dual Language program, such as the one where I teach, is that the teacher should not provide direct translations because there are times when things cannot be translated and some of the meaning may be lost. Instead, students serving as language mediation messengers should interpret from Spanish to English with words with which they feel most comfortable in order to get the message across. I see this as an opportunity for the language mediator to use their second language system that is being developed. Serving as a language mediator also develops their leadership skills as they become a go-to person, which I see as validating; in this case it is typically a Spanish-speaking student who has the know-how because the language of my classroom is Spanish. When following this model, if the teacher takes away the opportunity to use language or does not follow through, a couple of things happen: 1) the child seeking help will not get the help and will be left in the dark, 2) the child who can help is not given the opportunity to use one of the two language systems they possess. Ultimately, an opportunity for language enactment by the student has been lost.

Conclusion

If you are a teacher or anyone working with children in a K-12 setting, I urge you to shift your view as I have in order to share in the role as teacher with your students. The message is clear, as teachers, we all have the choice to take advantage of our opportunity to contribute to the educational experiences of our students. Shifting the way we see our roles and that of our students changes the paradigm within the classroom, but most importantly, initiates the commencement of our transformation as teachers and that of our students as active participants with voice in the daily dialogue of their educational experience — which in itself is transformational. I believe that socio-cultural mediation fosters relationships where teaching and learning are interchanged between the traditional and non-traditional roles of both teacher and student. Fostering an environment through socio-cultural mediation, to me as a teacher, means using workstations in order to facilitate opportunities for students to become active and resilient participants of the learning process. It means that teachers provide time for collaborative learning and for constructing new ideas. It means that teachers recognize that the class is filled with 23 learners and 23 teachers, therefore providing each child with the opportunity to work with a teacher that gives them purposeful attention within open learning dialogues. Through interactive activities, in a Dual Language classroom, students' cognitive development grows because of shared learning experience (Alanis, 2011). Interaction enables the development of rigorous skills in two languages when multiple opportunities for students to speak and show knowledge are offered (Alanis, 2011). When teachers and students act as co-mediators of their learning in a purposeful manner, knowledge is elevated for both teachers and students and among students themselves (Flores et al., 1991). I argue that these changes empower a second language learner to feel valued; thus having a positive effect on cognitive, developmental, and self-identity growth. Soltero (2004) refers to children as authentic models of language and culture for their peers when they work together (p. 28). I contend that workstations are an easy way to motivate students to actively learn, interact, and be language and cultural peer models for their classmates.

The use of socio-cultural mediation led me to the realization that my classroom and, most importantly, the interactions I have with my students transforms not just me, but the way everyone in the classroom interacts with each other. I implemented a transformative pedagogy that requires me to reflect, which is key in finding my inner student. I put myself in my students' shoes. If we think about this through the eyes and hearts of our students, what we are really doing is a systematic removal of the student's cultural and linguistic capital as the students are "transitioned" into using the mainstream language and institutionalized ways of the school. I understand that at some point students will have to take standardized tests in English, but learning a second language can be accomplished in a way that is beneficial to the students. As an advocate of transformative pedagogy, but most important, as an advocate of my students, I believe that teachers should serve to tap a student's cultural and linguistic capital, while supplementing that knowledge with new knowledge constructed in the classroom in order to further learning. I also feel that when looking at institutional discourses we should reflect on the outcome socio-cultural mediation can have on learning. I assert that teachers should assume a sense of commitment and accountability towards their students for the betterment of all. As I try to implement my vision of education, I am hopeful and feel that I do not have to face the challenge alone.

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