The Social Construction of Ability and Disability: II. Optimal and At-Risk Lessons in a Bilingual Special Education Classroom

Nadeen T. Ruiz

Bilingual students’ language and literacy skills were compared across three classroom events in a special day classroom for students with language learning disabilities. Events ranged from the teacher-structured, formal class openings to the informal, peer-structured sociodramatic play. Results showed that certain contextual features were associated with enhanced student performance, whereas others were associated with communicative breakdowns and problems with literacy tasks. This ethnographic study, in conjunction with other naturalistic research on bilingual special education classrooms, undergirds the Optimal Learning Environment (OLE) Project by identifying effective instructional contexts for bilingual students identified as having language learning disabilities.

Naturalistic studies of bilingual children in special education classrooms are few and far between. Yet, children who come to school speaking a language other than English constitute the fastest-growing group of children in our most populous states (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). Contact between children with diverse linguistic backgrounds and the special education system will only continue to increase.

In the mid to late 1980s, a handful of bilingual special education researchers answered the call to describe and explain what really happens to bilingual students in special classrooms. These researchers moved away from large-scale psychometric investigations and self-report studies of special education, from which it was difficult to understand what students’ educational experiences and needs looked like, to investigations that focused on the day-to-day interaction between teachers and students. Most of these latter studies were either case studies or ethnographic studies.

Table 1 lists these studies and provides a brief description of each. The majority were naturalistic in that they attempted to explain the classrooms in the most authentic way possible, without significantly altering the students’ and teachers’ patterns of interaction. A few had an intervention component. However, all of the studies can be viewed as supporting a theory that is gaining prominence among special education researchers doing ethnographic work (Gleason, 1989; Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986; Rueda & Mehan, 1986; Ruiz, 1988; Ruiz, Figueroa, Rueda, & Beaumont, 1992; Taylor, 1991, 1993), namely, that the context of interaction dramatically affects children’s abilities and disabilities. Essentially, the children in these ethnographic studies could look like they had serious communication or literacy problems when lessons were constructed in a certain way, but with lessons of a very different kind, a new picture of the same children’s abilities emerged.

The present article reports the findings of a study that shares that emerging theoretical framework. The study (Ruiz, 1988) was an ethnographic investigation of a bilingual (Spanish-English) self-contained classroom for students identified as language learning disabled. I spent 20 months in this classroom acting as a participant-observer, as well as audiotaping classroom interaction and keeping fieldnotes. Based on an extensive review of those tapes and fieldnotes, I identified a number of themes, one of which is highlighted in this article. Language and literacy in this bilingual special education classroom are socially organized into various communicative or classroom events (see Note), which can be identified through situational and discourse features of classroom language (e.g., turn-taking). Depending on this organization, one can see either the upper range of students’ language and literacy skills, or the lower range.

Method

The unit of analysis for this study was the classroom event, a socially
organized unit of classroom discourse. I identified classroom events through a two-step process. First, I categorized the database to initially account for every interaction sequence recorded in the classroom. The database comprised 28 day-long observations of the classroom, 32 hours of audiotaped classroom interaction, and extensive fieldnotes. Second, I selected contextual features used by other ethnographers (Gumperz, 1982; Hymes, 1964) to identify classroom events. I then adapted their methods of analysis to describe and explain the particulars of interaction in this bilingual special education classroom (see Table 2). For example, “Degree of language learn-
ing disability” is not usually a sub-component of “participants” in ethnographies of communication. In the present study, however, it was an important feature that was highly associated with discourse patterns and interrelated with other situational features, such as spatial organization, turn-taking, code choice, pause time, fixed lexical sets, and so on.

From the audiotapes, I transcribed over half of the instances of each classroom event. The remaining untranscribed episodes were reviewed orally. I took detailed notes as to whether they were additional evidence or exceptions to the patterns noted in the transcribed events.

Though all the contextual features listed in Table 2 were used for the identification and analysis of classroom events, I chose to emphasize certain features in my descriptions. Those features are associated with formality—a construct discussed by Irvine (1979) and applied to the classroom by Dickinson (1985). Briefly, formal events have increased structuring of the rules governing communicative behavior. These include (a) increased structuring of linguistic and non-linguistic codes, such as spatial organization; (b) emergence of a central situational focus; and (c) more consistent co-occurrence relationships between language choice and social connotations. The situational features most directly associated with these dimensions of formality are noted in Table 2.

The first characteristic of formal events, increased code structuring, refers to the “tightening up” of what is acceptable communication on many levels. For example, during very formal events, students need to raise their hand to get a turn, not just speak. They may be constrained to a certain space in the room, such as at their desk, rather than being free to move about as classroom talk goes on. The second feature of formality listed above, a central focus, keeps classroom talk bound to certain topics. In a very formal—class opening—to the moderately formal—lessons—to the least formal—sociodramatic play. Taken together, they provide a range of occasions for students to display their language and literacy skills.

My specific interest was to look among these classroom events for instances of when the children showed their communicative competence, that is, their understanding of and ability to use socially appropriate language (Volk, 1992). Evidence for communicative competence or weakness was based on a variety of aspects of discourse, such as appropriate use of language forms (vocabulary and grammar), functions (speech acts), turn-taking, conversational initiations, flu-

### Table 2

Selected Contextual Features for the Identification and Analysis of Classroom Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Code choice</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher/aide*</td>
<td>English–Spanish</td>
<td>Imposed topical framework*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Imposed*</td>
<td>Negotable framework*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language dominance</td>
<td>Elected*</td>
<td>Central situational focus*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of disability</td>
<td>Surface linguistic signs/forms</td>
<td>Relation to turn-taking*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space</td>
<td>Fixed lexical sets*</td>
<td>Personal topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constraints/organization*</td>
<td>Syntactic restrictions*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Positional identity*</td>
<td>Intonation*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Relation to event boundaries</td>
<td>Pause time between turns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Phonological accuracy*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Time of day</td>
<td>Code switching</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Length allotted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relation to event boundaries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Channel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral</td>
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<tr>
<td>Written</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interactional Norms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student turn-taking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher nomination*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Invitation to bid*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student reply</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Student initiation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Conversational structure</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>initiation–response</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>initiation–response–evaluation*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Turn length</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Openings and closings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sequencing</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Identifies features that are linked to formality.
ency, topic-centered language, code switching (use of two languages within or between utterances), and extended turns of talk. Other classroom ethnographies of communication have studied these aspects of student discourse but not within a bilingual special education classroom (e.g., Cazden, 1988; Saravia-Shore & Arvizu, 1992). I was also interested in the occasions when students showed their academic competence. Within the three literacy-oriented events highlighted in this study, students gave evidence of their academic competence when they used written language that was comparatively advanced for them. Advanced features of written language included appropriate use of language forms and functions, fluency, extended texts, coherent texts, and well-developed story grammar.

Results

Over the course of the ethnographic study I identified three profile types of students in Mrs. Dixon’s special day class (Ruiz, 1988, this issue). I based the profiles on the students’ degree of disability as they interacted in a range of classroom contexts. Profile Type 1 students have moderate to severe disabilities; Profile Type 2 students include students with mild disabilities to normal abilities; and Profile Type 3 students have normal abilities. As the students sharing these profile types participated in a range of classroom events, certain features of those events covaried with the upper range of their language and literacy abilities, and others with the lower range (see Table 3). Following is a discussion of how the classroom participants display these abilities in three events.

Class Openings

Class openings are the most formal event in Mrs. Dixon’s classroom; they are also the most ritualized. In the following narrative description of a class opening for March 28, the profile type of each child is given in parenthesis.

When Mrs. Dixon arrives at school, her students follow her in. The children engage in various conversations with their peers and teachers. A few minutes before 9:00 a.m., Mrs. Dixon checks the sign in front of the classroom to remind herself of the language of the day and directs the children to put away their things. The children quickly move to their desks, where they wait quietly as Mrs. Dixon moves to the front of the room, lunch count in hand, and inquires what will be served for lunch. Mrs. Dixon selects Victor (3) “since he raised his hand,” to read the school menu from the back of the room. Mrs. Dixon begins to determine which children will eat in the cafeteria by calling the children by their last names, in alphabetical order (e.g., Miss Anguiano, Miss Gonzalez). All answer, “Yes, please.”

Mrs. Dixon asks Anita (1) to lead the children in the flag salute. After the salute, Mrs. Dixon moves to the calendar corner, where she begins to query the children with a set of questions that is asked daily, in the same order. Mrs. Dixon first asks Esteban (1) in English to name the day. Two seconds later she repeats the question in Spanish. After 19 seconds with no response, Mrs. Dixon allows Nelly (2) and Victor (3) to try and help him. Their answers are incorrect. Pilar (3) is able to supply the sought-after response, “Today is Wednesday.” Mrs. Dixon continues her questioning about the date, this time selecting Virginia (1) to respond. Only after a series of attempts to elicit the correct response, characterized by pauses of around 20 seconds between each teacher elicitation and student response, is Virginia able to say the date with a rising intonation pattern: “Twenty-eighth?”

Gina (2) is selected next, to answer the question about the number of remaining days in the month. She does so correctly, after being prompted to phrase her answer in a complete sentence. Mrs. Dixon then calls on Pilar (3) to write the day’s date on a strip of paper that will be placed next to the calendar, and to tell the class about the weather.

Pilar (3) makes quick work of reporting the weather, while Mrs. Dixon records her observations on the board. Her responses very nearly echo those that have been given in the past on an English day: “It’s sunny. It’s a little breezy. [Mrs. Dixon writes only “It’s breezy”] It’s warm. There are a few clouds. There was dew on the grass.” Mrs. Dixon thanks Pilar, who goes back to her seat.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contextual Features of Classroom Events Associated with the Upper and Lower Ranges of Children’s Language and Literacy Abilities</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Upper range</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Emphasis on communication, not language forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic choice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased student initiations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-directed discourse</td>
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<tr>
<td>Functional use of language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole texts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Centered on students’ experiences and background knowledge</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Class openings have a marked degree of code structuring of language use, a primary characteristic of a formal event. Students must adhere to the language of the day and either translate response they give in the "wrong" language, or pass their turn on to someone else. (Only Profile Type 1 children, such as Esteban, are allowed to waive this rule, as in the narrative above.) In general, only specific behaviors, such as hand-raising, will get the students a turn at the floor without censure. Conversational structure is largely the typical tripartite sequences—teacher initiation, student response, teacher evaluation—noted by other classroom researchers (Mehan, 1979). In fact, Mrs. Dixon initiates up to 93% of the conversation in certain phases of this event, and 81% overall.

Class openings also have very fixed topic sequences and lexical sets. If children begin to bring up topics other than the date and the weather, Mrs. Dixon brings them back to the central situational focus. If they use vocabulary outside of the preapproved sets, Mrs. Dixon prompts them to return to those sets, as in the transcript of Pilar’s (Profile Type 3) reporting of the weather found in Table 4. In that exchange, Pilar was shown that “Hace poquito viento” (It’s a little windy”) is not an acceptable variation of “Hace brisa” (It’s breezy”).

Classroom openings also call for specific syntactic forms. Mrs. Dixon expects certain students, generally those with Profile Types 2 and 3, to answer in complete sentences. Essentially, students in Mrs. Dixon’s class learn that in class openings their responses to elicitations and their talk in general is up for evaluation. Class openings, then, are a very formal event that emphasizes the students’ verbal performance.

Most of Mrs. Dixon’s students tend not to show the upper range of their communicative competence in this event. They produce long pauses and responses that have high terminal rises (ending with a rising intonation)—both features of discourse that make the students seem hesitant. In short, the lexical, syntactic, topic, conversational, and code constraints on language use in class openings paint a picture of limited communicative competence. Class openings possess many features that are associated with the lower range of children’s communicative competence (see Table 3).

Lessons

Each lesson has features that establish it as a distinct classroom event with its own goals, participation structures, and discourse patterns. But a unique characteristic of a lesson is that there are two subtypes: lessons for Profile Type 1 children, and lessons for Profile Types 2 and 3 children. I will refer to the former as Lessons A and the latter as Lessons B. First, however, I describe what all lessons have in common.

All lessons involve small groups of children sitting around a small teacher’s table in the classroom’s perimeter to work on either language arts or mathematics. Children not participating in lessons at a particular time stay at their desks to work on tasks in their individual work folders.

Lessons in general present a mixed bag in terms of formality. Teachers organize the space used for lessons, select a code (English or Spanish, according to the school’s determination of the children’s language dominance), and determine a central situational focus—all characteristic elements of a formal event. However, only 65% of teacher-initiated conversational turns take the form of initiation—response—evaluation sequences in lessons, as compared to 93% in certain phases of class openings. Also, students initiate more conversational turns: 29% in lessons as compared to 19% in class openings. Both of these features indicate that talk in lessons begins to look more like conversational or everyday discourse, that is, a series of initiations and responses, without evaluations and with children, rather than solely adults, initiating conversation.

Also in lessons, the number of student responses ending with rising, hesitant seeming intonation drops to less that 17%, as compared to 60% in class openings. Teachers relax the turn-allocation system, allowing children to respond to elicitations without formal bidding for a turn (i.e., hand-raising). In general, lessons emphasize students’ verbal performance much less than do class openings. On the formality continuum, then, lessons are less formal than class openings.

### Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Verbal text</th>
<th>English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pilar</td>
<td>¿Hace poquito viento?</td>
<td>It’s a little windy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Dixon</td>
<td>Mm-hm. ¿Qué es, qué es la palabra?</td>
<td>Mm-hm. What is, what is the word?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>=Brisa=</td>
<td>=Breezy=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Dixon</td>
<td>¿Qué es la palabra? (ignoring other child’s utterance) ¿Qué es la palabra?</td>
<td>=What is the word? What is the word?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilar</td>
<td>¿Brisa?</td>
<td>Breezy?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The symbol = denotes that one conversational turn is simultaneous with the following one.
Lessons A. Although all lessons share the features described above, lessons for Profile Type 1 children—Lessons A—have a distinct character. Following is an example of a Lesson A.

Francisco and Anita are at Miss Chaparro’s teaching table for their language arts lesson in Spanish. Miss Chaparro takes out four puppets that the children have made earlier: a letter carrier, a nurse, a policeman, and a teacher. She asks Francisco to put on the letter carrier puppet and talk about his work in that role. Francisco relates how he goes to Miss Chaparro’s house to deliver letters. She in turn asks him if a dog is going to bite him today, and Francisco launches into a narrative about being bitten by a Chihuahua. When asked what is sold in his office, Francisco first replies “food” but readily accepts Miss Chaparro’s suggestion of stamps, and again begins a long turn of talk, rather hard to follow, regarding envelopes, money inside them, and books that he will give the children and teacher.

Miss Chaparro ends Francisco’s turn by thanking the letter carrier politely. She turns to ask Anita, the nurse, about the situation in the hospital. Anita replies that things are going badly, that many patients have asthma. The conversation then takes many unexpected turns as Anita suggests that, as the nurse, she puts on the doctor’s shoes, walks a lot, is going to a party, and other actions that are difficult to understand because of her articulation difficulties. Anita’s extended sequence of turns finishes with another difficult-to-follow narrative about her real stay in the hospital for asthma. Miss Chaparro ends the sequence by thanking the nurse and calling for the police officer, Francisco.

With a siren-like sound and a lowered voice, Francisco begins his stint as the police officer explaining his job. He asks to see the nurse, Anita, and he and she talk in their roles, with Miss Chaparro occasionally clarifying. When the nurse states that she is looking for a husband and leans over to kiss the policeman puppet, Francisco and Miss Chaparro move on to safer subjects, like robbers and the dog pound.

The last sequence of turns involves Anita as a teacher. With frequent questions from Miss Chaparro, Anita talks of writing names on the board and, again, of a boyfriend.

Francisco, still in the police officer role, threatens to put the boyfriend in jail if he does not have a license for his guns. Anita tries to end her turn by saying “Adios” repeatedly. Miss Chaparro finally lets her off the hook when Anita says that her students have gone outside. Again, Miss Chaparro politely thanks the teacher, and the lesson is over. (Later in the day, Miss Chaparro has Francisco and Anita put on their puppets and talk in role in front of the whole class, to everyone’s enjoyment.)

Lessons for Profile Type 1 children avoid fixed topic sequences or lexical sets. There is little restriction of syntactic form. Teachers do not place an emphasis on students’ responding with phonological and grammatical accuracy; instead, they simply model usage. The conversational structure is punctuated by longer turns from students, facilitating narratives. While the teachers’ and students’ code consistency in terms of English or Spanish is quite stable, sometimes they shift their register or tone, which lends a playful tone to Lessons A, as illustrated in the narrative above.

Lessons A also stand out as a time when students’ personal identities are highlighted. The learning tasks call upon them to verbally encode their background knowledge and personal experiences. When students participate in Lessons A, we begin to see the upper range of their communicative competence, even when that competence is impaired with a severe language learning disability. Students more frequently initiate conversational turns, produce longer turns of speech, and produce a greater range of language forms (statements, questions, imperatives) and functions (describing, explaining, negotiating, etc.).

In Lessons A, the children’s enhanced communicative competence co-occurs with certain contextual features of the event, including (a) activities centered on students’ background knowledge and experiences; (b) opportunities for verbal activity versus passivity (student initiations, longer conversational turns, greater range of functions and forms); and (c) an emphasis on communicating meaningful messages, not on language forms. Thus, Lessons A suggest optimal features of classroom events—"optimal" because they are associated with Latino students’ showing the upper range of their communicative skills (see Table 3, left-hand column).

Lessons B. Quite another type of lesson occurs with children sharing Profile Types 2 and 3. Here, Victor (Profile Type 3) and Nelly (Profile Type 2) participate in a reading lesson. An example of a Lesson B follows.

After the first recess, Nelly and Victor are called to Mrs. Dixon’s teaching table. Mrs. Dixon has written the following words on the board: Column 1—I’ll, We’ll, the seal, I, the meat, me; Column 2—fly, fly, see. Mrs. Dixon first provides an example, I’ll fly, and then asks the children to write sentences using these words from the two columns. Victor writes, The seal sees. We’ll fly. I fly. Nelly writes, The seal sees. I fly, sees the seal. Fly I’ll we’ll.

Mrs. Dixon notices Nelly’s last few sentences and requests repeatedly, “Tell me what you’re doing.” When Nelly does not reply, Mrs. Dixon shows her how to begin with the first column. Nelly erases her last sentences and begins to write another, We’ll the seal. Mrs. Dixon asks her to read the first word in her new sentence (we’ll) and Nelly guesses first wagon, then lamp. Mrs. Dixon instructs her to stop guessing. When Nelly starts to slowly say wagon again, Mrs. Dixon snaps her
fingers and says, "Get wagon out of your mind, okay?" Nelly reads, "We'll."

Mrs. Dixon asks Victor and Nelly to read their third and second sentences, which she approves. Then Nelly reads her third sentence, sees the seal. Mrs. Dixon acknowledges Nelly's good idea for a sentence, "See the seal," but explains that the word in the column is sees and she must use sees not see.

Mrs. Dixon notices that the children have not used the meat or fry. She asks for a sentence with these words and Nelly excitedly suggests, "Fry the egg" and "I fry eggs." Mrs. Dixon rejects these sentences because egg is not currently a reading word for Nelly and Victor. After an 8-second pause, Nelly offers again, "Fry the egg," to which Mrs. Dixon replies, "Nelly, get eggs out of your mind." Nelly suggests "eggs" one final time during the following sequence, but finally comes up with "the meat."

Victor informs Mrs. Dixon that he has finished another sentence: Sees me. Mrs. Dixon writes see next to sees and asks Victor if they are the same. He says no and is told, "That's why we can't use this word (see) in the sentence." Nelly, too, has trouble with her next sentence, I fry I meat, but Mrs. Dixon helps her insert the and praises her good idea for a sentence. Mrs. Dixon then gives a few more examples of combinations the children could have used. Mrs. Dixon moves to end the lesson with an extended turn.

For example, when Victor and Nelly use a word or inflected form not on their reading list (see instead of sees), Mrs. Dixon does not accept their contributions. In essence, the children in this context are asked to construct meaning given a limited set of grammatical and lexical tools. The process entails the teacher first giving the form in which the students' response is to be fashioned, and then asking them to construct meaning using that form. Many of the children's struggles with language emerge with this distinctive feature of Lessons B. In the transcript shown in Table 5, Victor tries to formulate a sentence with the word "mine." At the end of this lesson, Mrs. Dixon tries to protect Victor from problems similar to the above with the seatwork task she will assign—writing sentences with their reading words: "The words in 3 and 4 you need to write sentences for. Victor, you be very careful with words like sneeze and please that you don't use he with these words. Or she. Okay?"

Using sneeze with he results in the ungrammatical He sneeze. In this lesson and others revolving around reading words, it is not an option to add an "s" to make sneezes; the reading word is sneeze and that is the word that must be used in the sentence. As it happens, I collected Victor's sentences the following week and found that he had written the following: He's sneeze.

The lessons taught here certainly go beyond how to decode, spell, and use "sneeze" in a sentence. These excerpts from Lessons B suggest a particular view of learning to read, write, and speak, one that stresses the importance of linguistic form over meaning. Linguistic forms become the focus in these lessons. They are broken down and separated from contexts with real communicative intent. They are practiced until the children's "bad" language habits become "good" ones.

The behaviorist, or reductionist (Poplin, 1988a), model of instruction is easy to detect here. This is not surprising: That model, with its emphasis on behavioral objectives and behavior modification, pervades much of special education instruction. But the behaviorist model ignores important developmental aspects of language and literacy learning. It does not recognize certain "bad" behaviors, or "errors," as simply developmental indicators of language and literacy learning. Furthermore, the behaviorist model of teaching is in direct opposition to current thought on learning to read, write, and speak a second language (Cambourne & Turbill, 1987; Freeman & Freeman, 1992).

There is no doubt that in Lessons B the students are learning an important message tied to academic success: The written form of language must be specific and precise. Essayistic forms of discourse possess these

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Verbal text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victor</td>
<td>Um: I'll say. That's is my recorder.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Dixon</td>
<td>No, the word is mine, Victor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nelly</td>
<td>Look at mine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Dixon</td>
<td>(Ignores Nelly's suggestion.) (8½ second pause) Can't say that is my.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2-second pause) Nelly, hold your feet still.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victor</td>
<td>That book is mine?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. : indicates lengthened syllable (each : = one "beat").
characteristics; children struggling with oral and written aspects of academic discourse seldom do. But again, most of the recent work on helping children become more proficient in using academic discourse emphasizes how the students must build a bridge to the school’s communication and literacy events with their own ways of speaking, their own experiences, and their own cultural organization (Au, 1993; Heath, 1983). Lessons A seem to actively build that bridge to children’s background knowledge and personal experiences. Lessons B assume that the bridge is in place when children are ready to read and write, and that it no longer needs to be addressed.

Participation in either lesson type has direct and important consequences for the children’s language and literacy lessons. In Lessons A, children learn that their personal experiences and knowledge have an important place in the learning task. The talk in this lesson type revolves around it, as do art and dramatic activities. The children practice longer turns of talk, with less emphasis on appropriate phonological or grammatical form, or on a fixed topic sequence. But there is no direct link to reading and writing in Lessons A; children do not write down their ideas or see words being written down by the teachers, nor do they hear the conventions and purposes of written forms discussed or instructed.

Lessons B, on the other hand, offer powerful literacy lessons on the importance and specificity of texts. They emphasize fixed lexical and topical sets and accuracy of phonological and grammatical form. But Lessons B have little relation to the children’s ways of using language for making meaning or to encoding their background experiences into writing and reading texts. The forms, constraints, and meaning of the curricular materials take precedence. Lessons B contain many features associated with the lower range of students’ communicative and academic competence (see Table 3, right-hand column).

In stark contrast to Lessons B, another event in Mrs. Dixon’s class—storybook making—shows us the upper range of the students’ literacy skills (see Ruiz, this issue, for a description of this event and student work samples emerging from it). Briefly, Mrs. Dixon encourages her students to make storybooks when they finish independent work in their work folder. They actively choose their own topics, code, syntax, and vocabulary. They create whole texts, inserting their personal experience and background knowledge. The product, the book, is not solely for teacher evaluation of their language and literacy skills. It has a real-life function: It goes on the class bookshelf as a book to be enjoyed by peers and parents. Essentially, this event contains all the features located in the left-hand column of Table 3. It is also an event that showcases the sometimes surprising abilities of the students even when they have a severe language learning disability (Ruiz, this issue).

It is important to note that when I began this study, the bilingual special education classroom was only in its second year of operation. In the time since then, Mrs. Dixon has reported to me that she has radically changed her reading and writing curricula lessons to look much more like storybook making. So, although this section is critical of Lessons B in terms of this study, Mrs. Dixon and her colleagues have shifted their instructional practices in the direction of optimal instruction for Latino children in special education (Ruiz, García, & Figueroa, 1995).

Mrs. Dixon made substantive changes in her approach to literacy instruction, but many other teachers have not. Recent research points out that special education classrooms with high concentrations of Latino children continue to provide instructional services that are highly reductionist in nature (Rueda, Betts, & Hami, 1990; Ruiz, 1990). Further, even general education teachers assign such writing tasks as creating sentences or stories with spelling words, and, for a number of students, this demand to construct meaning with fixed lexical and syntactic constraints creates a risk context: Students are at risk of showing a lesser level of language and literacy competence.

Sociodramatic Play

Mrs. Dixon proved to be a highly innovative teacher in another classroom event. She encouraged her students, both before school and at certain times during the school day, to engage in sociodramatic play. Sociodramatic play occurs when two or more children engage in thematic pretend play based on their experiences, that is, act as if they are another person, animal, or object (Sachs, Goldman, & Chaille, 1985; Stern, 1984).

Sociodramatic play is an informal context for language and literacy learning in Mrs. Dixon’s class. It is also a time when the upper range of her students’ communicative competence emerges. In the following narrative I describe a sociodramatic play occurring after a celebratory lunch for having filled a jar with marbles, each marble representing a good behavior.

Narrative of a Sociodramatic Play, La Tiendita (“The Store”). Mrs. Dixon’s class is having a party today because the marble jar is filled. The children and adults have brought food for a luncheon buffet. Mrs. Dixon says that after lunch they may play store. Mrs. Dixon and Miss Chaparro busy themselves at their desks while the children begin their play. The older girls, Rosemary, Cristina, Pilar, and Gina, begin moving tables and books to set up the store. Anita asks me to help her make money out of little pieces of paper she has cut, which she promptly gives to Nelly. Pilar directs Anita to give some money to Francisco. Pilar also begins a conversation with me, labeling and explaining her props for the play: pads of paper for the receipts she will write out, a box for the cash register. Amid the bustling and conversation, Mrs. Dixon jokes with me about her unnecessary
presence from across the room, saying that she will be back around 3:00, at the end of the school day.

Preparations continue, with Pilar asking Rosemary about the sign they had made a few days earlier which says Abierto (Open) on one side and Cerrado (closed) on the other. Pilar remembers that she took it home in her purse and Rosemary directs her to enlist my help in making a new one.

During these preparations, Rosemary responds to Cristina’s and Pilar’s questions about roles, boundaries, and procedures. For example, she says that Cristina will be the person in the back of the store who gives the prices over the intercom system when there is no tag on the item.

Nelly, in the meantime, flits back and forth between the store and the money-making table. When she suggests that there be more than one store, Rosemary informs her that no, there will be only one store with different cash registers. However, Gina begins to make her own Abierto/Cerrado sign. This sparks questions about the owner of the store and whether there is one owner or two. An argument ensues between Pilar and Gina, with Pilar asserting that there is only one central store and Gina that she has her own separate store. Gina wins.

Mrs. Dixon lets the children know that they may line up for some soda. A while later, Miss Chaparro informs them that she has a 7-Up store and that she charges for sips. Most of the children collect their drinks and move back to the store.

Anita is solicited by Pilar, Nelly, and Virginia as a purchaser of books. Later, she and Victor try to enter Gina’s store, only to find out that it is closed. Victor respects Gina’s directive but Anita does not (Gina occasionally complains about Anita throughout the episode). When the stores officially open, Rosemary makes the whirring and beeping sound of computerized cash registers. Nelly tries to buy a Bambi book from Pilar, but when she is told that it costs $100, Nelly replies “Hijole, no!” (“Heavens, no!”), and Pilar quickly lowers the price to $1, even giving change. Mrs. Dixon and I overhear, and laugh and comment about the exchange. Soon after, Anita tries to buy a book from Pilar. Pilar tells her that the price is $2, and Anita tries to imitate the previous interaction by replying, “Ay, no.” It is not successful in getting the reaction that Nelly and Pilar’s exchange did. Pilar says that $2 is not very much money. Anita walks away without her book.

Later, Anita once again wants to buy a book. Pilar states the price, $100, and Anita says to give her two. Now Pilar tells her that $100 is a lot of money and that she does not have enough. Anita again walks away without a purchase.

Early on, Francisco states that he is going to rob the stores, but he is repelled by the store owners. Esteban enters as a drunk and accidentally knocks over one of the girls’ sodas. Amid giggles and shushing sounds, the girls and I clean up the mess.

Victor enters Pilar’s store through “the back.” Pilar, who is very Spanish dominant, chases Victor out with, “Get out of here, you runt!” The rest of La Tiendita alternates between play in role and negotiation about the play.

The informality of sociodramatic play manifests itself in many ways. The children can decide on the use of space. Adults do not control turn-taking or the topic framework; in fact, their participation is usually invited by the students. No teacher initiation—student response—teacher evaluations occur. There are no fixed lexical sets or syntactic constraints. Teachers do not impose code choice, nor do they group children by language dominance. In this heterogeneous, bilingual setting, the result is a fluid and dynamic use of both languages, called “code switching.” Even when students are not yet very proficient in their second language, sociodramatic play encourages them to use the language as they move along with the others through the play. For example, in La Tiendita, the very-English-dominant Gina writes her store sign in Spanish and chases Anita out of her store in Spanish, too.

Another aspect of code structuring concerns intonation patterns of student responses to teacher elicitations. Numerous terminal-rise responses are an important indicator of the relative degree of formality of events; they are tied to the children’s responsibility to perform verbally for teacher evaluation. In sociodramatic play, this high-pitch pattern never occurs. Teachers and aides seldom make elicitations in this event, and on the minute number of occasions that they do, students always respond with a natural, falling-pitch pattern typical of everyday conversation. Obviously, this event does not emphasize the evaluation of student verbal performance. Intonation patterns are one of many ways that this is made clear.

During sociodramatic play, the students also show their control over different speech registers associated with the different roles they play. In another occurrence of this event, playing house, Anita and Virginia give their version of baby talk (high-pitched whining and telegraphic utterances), while Nelly is alternately a directing mother with crisp orders for her pack of children going off to school or a sympathetic caretaker using very high-pitched talk as she soothes their crying. In La Tiendita, Nelly and Pilar very politely use the usted form of address (connoting distance or formality in Spanish), until Nelly learns the stiff price of the Bambi book and responds with an interjection and suprasegmental pattern typical of informal contexts of talk in the local community. Francisco and Esteban take on the pitch patterns occasionally heard among men in their community: They lower their voice and use an emphatic pitch pattern noted among Spanish speakers from Mexico (Cruttendon, 1986).

In general, the children make use of speech registers typical of their (home) communities in sociodramatic play. Some, like Nelly and Pilar, exhibit a wide range of registers; others, like Virginia and Esteban, both Profile Type 1 children, show less variety.
across their roles in sociodramatic play. The latter group may lack skill with the structure and lexicon of the language, as when Anita says, "¿Qué número esto?" (What number this?) instead of "¿Cuánto cuesta?" (How much is it?). This group might also lack the social knowledge behind speech registers that comes from observing their parents interact frequently with secondary institutions, such as banks (Heath, 1986). Scripts such as these are important elements for successful sociodramatic play (Sachs et al., 1985).

The La Tiendita narrative also illustrates how cooperation is crucial to this play and how that, in turn, affects language interaction (Heath, 1985; Pellegrini, 1985). Even children who are not normally sought after as playmates, such as Anita and Francisco (Profile Type I children), become important. The older girls need book buyers, so Anita is called over to enter their store, and Francisco is given money without his asking. In sociodramatic play, Profile Type I children are engaged in language practice with more proficient language users.

In summary, this study supports others' contentsions that older children (over age 4) engage in fantasy play that is highly symbolic, and that the symbolic nature creates potentially ambiguous situations (Pellegrini, 1985). During sociodramatic play, children in this classroom use elaborated language to explain object and person transformations that occur during pretend play. In a sense, they tell a story (Heath, 1982); they construct a fantasy narrative line that is related temporally and causally, with language that reflects these connections (Sachs et al., 1985). Thus, sociodramatic play is a good display of explicit language, an important component of academic discourse. It is also an excellent display of what children know about the range of language forms and use in their homes and community. Finally, sociodramatic play is a good source of peer language and experiential teaching under meaningful and motivating conditions. For play to continue smoothly, breakdowns in these areas have to be repaired. The payoff is not only immediate, that is, making a successful conversational interchange during the event, it is also long term: Children with LLD are given lessons from their more language-proficient and socially skilled peers on the forms and uses of language, along with the associated background knowledge needed to communicate with non-intimates in contexts outside of school. Classroom instructional contexts that share characteristics of sociodramatic play and, by extension, the features listed in the left-hand column in Table 3, will likely constitute a similar optimal context. Cooperative learning is a natural example.

Sociodramatic play in this bilingual special education classroom provided a look at the language use of Latino children identified as language learning disabled that is unique in two ways—ways that are associated with some fundamental problems in bilingual special education. First, sociodramatic play is an excellent context for viewing the upper range of the students' language skills. This context dramatically differs from the context used to ascertain Latino children's language abilities—standardized tests. Scores are almost invariably low due to myriad social factors affecting the validity of these tests with the U.S. Hispanic population (Figueroa, 1990; Ruiz, 1987). The tests provide little information as to the range of language forms and functions these children are capable of using in social situations other than testing or formal academic ones, all of which have very different participation structures and ways of using language than those at home. With regard to this study's theme of abilities covarying with context, sociodramatic play is a peer-structured event that allows for verbal participation patterns different from those in any other event-patterns that add to the picture of the student's language abilities. The event features of sociodramatic play overlap with those listed in the left-hand column of Table 3—features associated with the upper range of students' abilities.

Second, this study supports Figueroa's (1993) contention that in optimal contexts, individual differences are even more clearly displayed. Even in this informal, peer-directed event, children with severe LLD give evidence of their language learning disability by less frequent verbal participation and more instances of communication breakdowns needing repairs. Observations of sociodramatic play can confirm diagnostic and other educational decisions; however, they can also call them into question. Records of Pilar's verbal participation during this event make the label originally applied to her, a "nonverbal child," seem ludicrous. Rosemary's and Nelly's records call into question the decision to teach them language arts and math solely in English. Their Spanish is more grammatically correct and more varied in its style and function. (Readers should remember that Rosemary and Nelly are exposed to Spanish every other day through Mrs. Dixon's alternate-day approach.)

Conclusion

In Mrs. Dixon's bilingual special education class there is a range of ways in which the children use their language and literacy skills, from the teacher-structured, formal class openings to the student-structured, informal sociodramatic play. Examining this range led to the identification of classroom contexts that revealed both the upper range and lower range of the children's language and literacy skills. For teachers and assessment personnel alike, features associated with the upper range of student language and academic competence are critical to creating optimal learning environments—optimal in that they paint a more valid picture of student ability and lead to accelerated student progress.
This study of Mrs. Dixon’s class was the catalyst for selecting the instructional strategies for the OLE Project. Charged with developing an effective curriculum for Spanish-speaking students in learning handicapped programs, I sought out instructional techniques that aligned themselves with the optimal features identified in this study, as well as those emerging from the studies listed in Table 1. Some of those strategies are Interactive Journals, Writer’s Workshop, Shared Reading with Predictable Books, Literacy Study, and Drop Everything and Read (D.E.A.R.) Time (Ruiz, Garcia, & Figueroa, 1995). Far from selecting these instructional techniques at random or from passing bandwagons, the OLE Project used research from bilingual special education classrooms to collaboratively construct, with teachers, optimal learning environments for students.

Besides the possible help this study may lend to the applied realm of special education, it has something to say about theory and paradigms. It suggests that those who view learning abilities and disabilities as internal to students, without acknowledging their powerful interaction with the situational context (essentially, the medical model view), would have trouble explaining the varying pictures of children’s language and learning abilities. Those subscribing to a contextual performance view (e.g., Ruiz, Rueda, Figueroa, & Boothroyd, this series) would have no trouble.

This study also suggests that those who favor reducing the curriculum to smaller fragments (essentially, the reductionist paradigm; see Poplin 1988a) would have trouble explaining why the Latino children in this study in fact did poorly in instructional contexts with reductionist features. Those observing the success of special education students, second-language learners, and bilingual learners in holistic-constructivist contexts (Poplin, 1988b) would have no trouble.

Depending on their organization, classroom lessons can either put bilingual children at risk or optimize their language and literacy performance. We need continued classroom research on the social organization of language and learning among bilingual children receiving special education services. These studies will add to and refine our knowledge of the contextual features of language and learning that showcase bilingual children’s abilities. They will also help us select instructional strategies with a record of success with bilingual children.

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NOTE

The term classroom event in the study overlaps in a general way with others’ conceptions and definitions of the units of analysis in classroom research, for example, lessons (Mahan, 1979) and activity settings (Gallimore & Tharp, 1988). But it draws most heavily from communicative event, a term used in ethnographies of communication for describing communication patterns of communities (Hymes, 1964). A communicative event is a sociocultural construct for studying speech that is derived from the community’s own social organization. It consists of recurring communication, bounded in time and space, for the same general purpose, and involving the same general topics, participants, language variety, tone or key, and norms for interaction (Savin-Trocke, 1982). These basic event components combine to portray the situational or contextual features of communication. I decided to change the term from communicative event to classroom event to more clearly encompass the written or literacy aspects of the events and not lead the reader into thinking that only oral communication was up for analysis.

REFERENCES


