THIRD EDITION

HANDBOOK OF RESEARCH ON TEACHING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

SPONSORED BY THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION & THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

EDITED BY DIANE LAPP • DOUGLAS FISHER
As Learners Acquire Language

COURTNEY B. CAZDEN

The title of this chapter, “As Learners Acquire Language,” was assigned in these words by the editors. At first glance, their wording may seem just an unusual way of expressing a focus on the learners who are both agents and beneficiaries of the life-long process of language acquisition. What makes the title unusual is the fact that its form is a dependent clause that begs the question of “So what else is happening? What else is being acquired along with language?” An answer would normally be supplied by the immediately following main clause; instead, supplying it is the topic of this chapter.

I will argue that learners acquire the language forms and culturally appropriate uses, first of their family and immediate face-to-face community, then of increasingly diverse communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in modes written as well as oral. In addition, for most people around the world and the increasing number of foreign-born Americans, learners acquire additional languages as well. Finally, and most significantly for this chapter, during this complex life-long process, language learners are also gaining new identities—initially singular, later increasingly multiple. This chapter does not attempt a literature review of either language learning or identity learning; its focus is only on their intersection.

Identity has been defined in various ways. James Gee, for example, gives “four ways to view identity.” Here are Gee’s categories, with my application to learners for each (2001, p. 100):

1. Nature (N)—identity as states given by nature: Learners as visually identifiable as by race or gender;
2. Institution (I)—identity as officially authorized: Learners as students in a certain school, grade, track, assigned class (e.g., Advanced Placement or Special Education);
3. Discourse (D)—identity as speakers (and writers) of a certain kind: learners audibly identifiable by accent, dialect, or as English language learner;
4. Affinity (A)—identity as experiences shared with specific groups: Learners in each particular classroom or, on a shorter time scale, in an ad hoc smaller group around a book or hobby, or as participants in a particular new media (e.g., Crystal, 2008).

In a later book, Gee (2008) explains in more detail his conception of relationships between discourses, as conventionalized variations in language forms and uses, and what he considers identities:

Discourses are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities (or “types of people”) by specific groups, whether families of a certain sort, lawyers of a certain sort, church members of a certain sort, African Americans of a certain sort, and so on and so forth through a very long list. Discourses are ways of being “people like us.” They are “ways of being in the world”... they are socially-situated identities. (p. 3)

All of Gee’s above four categories of identities are “socially situated.” The first, Gee’s Nature (N)—identity, may seem an exception, but how much of a difference any visible mark of differentiation makes is indeed socially situated (Bourdieu, 1991). Race, institutional labels, and speaking style interact in complex ways in influencing teachers’ expectations and how they routinely position students for opportunities to learn. See, for example, Australian Jennifer Miller’s (2003) Audible Difference: ESL and Social Identity in Schools.

In the Beginning

Consider the language/identity relationship in its beginning. Here are examples from the child-parent conversations of the first two children in Roger Brown’s now-classic study of the development of A First Language (1974). Given
pseudonyms as Adam and Eve, both children were from educated graduate-student families. They differed in age—Adam 27 months old, Eve 18 months at the beginning of the research—but the quality of their utterances and parental responses were similar.

The first article reporting that research (Brown & Bellugi, 1964) called attention to one frequent maternal response to the child’s not yet fully formed utterances, which they named “expansions” (from Table 3, p. 141):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Mother</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam: Sat wall</td>
<td>He sat on the wall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Throw Daddy</td>
<td>Throw it to Daddy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pick glove</td>
<td>Pick the glove up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eve: Baby highchair</td>
<td>Baby is in the highchair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eve lunch</td>
<td>Eve is having lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mommy sandwich Mommy’l</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a sandwich</td>
<td>I'll have a sandwich</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each expansion retains the exact order of the content words in the child’s utterance, adds in the necessary function words to express more explicitly relationships of place (on, to, in, up) time (‘ll have), whether action is completed or ongoing (is having), particular object vs. an example of a class (the vs. a). In Brown and Bellugi’s words, “It seems to us that a mother in expanding [her child’s] speech may be teaching more than grammar; she may be teaching something like a world view” (1964, 143). The “world view” they glimpse in its developmental beginnings Gee would consider a beginning identity. Adam and Eve are being socialized through language to be the appropriate kind of person in their family. We now can see a continuum in language socialization between these particular parent-child conversations and later teacher-student socialization in schools. Both families with educated parent families like Adam and Eve’s and most classrooms are communities of practice in which explicit expression of meaning is valued.

But there is also an importance difference between families and classrooms. In most families, the child is considered what Lave and Wenger (1991) call a “legitimate peripheral participant”—not yet a full participant, but fully expected to become one and supported all along the way. The result is virtually universal acquisition of “a first language.” In school, however, some learners—for reasons that often include audible (D), visual (N), or institutional (I) features of their identity—may be marginalized and not positioned with full opportunities to learn.

Language Socialization

Language socialization has come to be a widely used term for this reciprocal language/identity relationship. During the 1960s, two new research traditions were initiated. A psychological tradition (e.g., Brown & Bellugi) studied children’s language development by longitudinally following a very small sample of young children. This tradition is sometimes referred to as “developmental psycholinguistics.”

In 1964, the same year that Brown and Bellugi published their first article, the second tradition was also initiated. Two linguistic anthropologists, John Gumperz and Dell Hymes (1964), issued a programmatic call for a new field that would bridge linguistics and anthropology, to which they gave the name Ethnography of Communication. Among others, two younger anthropologists, Elinor Ochs and Bambi Schieffelin, answered this call and, in the then-typical anthropological tradition, went to study the development of children’s language in non-Western societies (Ochs in Samoa, Schieffelin in Papua New Guinea). They have now co-authored “an historical overview” of the language socialization literature that they helped to initiate (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2008).

Ochs and Schieffelin (2008) point out the limitations of the earlier tradition. First, it was limited in focus to the acquisition of grammar and phonology, ignoring the crucial fact that children were simultaneously gaining implicit knowledge of more than language. Second, Ochs and Schieffelin realized from their own research that, although the South Pacific children whose development they followed were learning the language of their home and face-to-face community as successfully as were the American children like Adam and Eve, they were doing so despite significant cultural differences in the language of their caregivers. In both Samoa and Papua New Guinea, caregivers did not talk like mothers in the United States research, limited as it then still was to families from the same academic communities as the researchers. Since Miller’s (1981) study of three children in working-class Baltimore, neither of these limitations holds true.

Outside the scope of this chapter is a continuing controversy within the developmental psycholinguistic literature about “the source of linguistic competence as located either in innate structures, as the product of verbal input from the child’s environment, or some combination of both” (Ochs and Schieffelin, 2008, p. 5). They point out that, even though their research was initiated in response to the limitations of the pro-nature tradition, it turns out to offer one resolution of the nature/nurture controversy:

Paradoxically, these observations about baby talk register at once support a rigorous biological capacity for children’s acquisition of phonology and grammar, flourishing independent of extensive grammatical simplification and clarification in the communicative environment, and an equally rigorous requirement for children’s sociocultural attunement to language-mediated acts, activities, genres, stances, meanings, roles, relationships, and ideologies through the process of language socialization. (p. 6)

Of course, like language learning, identity learning does not end in childhood. Few people remain members of only the culture of their family and earliest face-to-face community. We become members of additional social groups, ideally learning additional language variations and/or additional languages appropriate in each, and thereby become able to shift successfully with varying degrees of self-consciousness among multiple identities as, in Gee’s (2008) words, various “types of people.”
Socialization involves two fundamental processes: immersion of learners within communities of practice plus variable frequencies of more explicit teaching, as we will see in examples below. Sometimes the terms “acquisition” and “learning” are used to differentiate these forms of socialization—acquisition in contexts of immersion; learning in contexts of explicit teaching, especially in school. But all three terms—acquisition, learning, and socialization—are used variously by different authors, and readers should be careful to discern the intended referents in each context.

**Language Variations**

Language variations can be roughly differentiated as dialects, registers, and genres. (See entries for socialization, identity, register, and genre in the reference book, *Key Terms in Language and Culture*, Duranti, 2001.) Learning an additional language, so important in the educational biography of an increasing number of students in most classrooms, has had to be omitted from this chapter because of space limits.

**Dialects** Dialects are varieties of a language associated with regionally or socially defined groups of people, marked by syntax and pronunciation or accent. The dialect that is now referred to in educational discourse as Standard English started out as the regional speech of people in southeastern England; when they gained political dominance, so did their speech. Now, Standard English is a collection of the socially preferred dialects from various parts of the United States and other English-speaking countries (Adger, Wolfram, & Christian, 2007).

Regional dialects in the United States can still mark their speakers in ways perceived negatively by hearers. Shirley Brice Heath, author of the now classic *Ways with Words* (1983/1996), grew up in rural Virginia where her grandmother ran the store in an otherwise Black community. When she applied for graduate school, she was admonished to replace her southern accent with “general American pronunciation” (personal communication).

For reasons that have more to do with ethnocentric attitudes of hearers or readers than with linguistic differences themselves, the dialect most discussed in education is African American Vernacular English, and several times in the last 45 years local controversies about its use in schools have erupted into the national media (historical summary in Cazden, 2001, 174–177).

The most recent episode started in Oakland, California, in 1996–97. Concerned about the achievement gap between Black and White children, the Oakland School Board passed a well-intentioned resolution designed to guide teachers in helping African American students learn Standard English. Calling their African American dialect “Ebonics,” the resolution recognized it as a language system that should be taken into account in teaching the students to speak Standard English. Controversy over interpretations of the resolution quickly went national: for and against; from educators, linguists, politicians, parents; Black and White alike.

Some years before that 1996 resolution, Ogbu, a Nigerian-born Black anthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley, himself a resident of Oakland and member of the School Board Task Force that suggested the resolution, had conducted a 2-year ethnographic study of language attitudes among Black members of one Oakland public school community that he called Lafayette. In the aftermath of the controversy, he published a research report, “Beyond Language: Ebonics, Proper English and Identity in a Black-American Speech Community” (1999). Its importance then and now is that while the resolution and most of the ensuing controversy focused on linguistic differences between dialects per se, what Ogbu documented was the important influence of speakers’ dialect attitudes of which they were largely unaware.

In 2 years of ethnographic observations, and interviews with 33 adults and 76 students in elementary through high school, Ogbu’s research team documented strong mixed emotions of ambivalence and resistance. His summary adopts the terms most often used in the Lafayette community: proper English and slang English.

The problem which the people of this community are not aware of I will call their dialect dilemma. The dilemma is that Lafayette Blacks hold incompatible beliefs about proper English: (a) They believe on the one hand that it is necessary to master it for education and job success, (b) but they also believe that mastering proper English threatens their slang English, their bona fide membership in their community and social solidarity; furthermore, mastering proper English for education and jobs is a requirement imposed on Black people by their White American oppressors. These incompatible beliefs raise the question of how to succeed in school and in the job market, both requiring proper English, and yet retain slang English identity, bona fide membership in Lafayette community and racial solidarity as Black people in America. (Ogbu, 1999, p. 168, emphasis in the original)

In an endnote to that paragraph, Ogbu cites evidence of such attitudes in other Black U.S. communities. Cazden, Bryant, and Tillman (1970) found similarly ambivalent attitudes in an earlier interview-only study of parents, teachers, and community leaders in a Black preschool community in Boston. The report’s title, taken from one of the interviews, was “Making It and Going Home.”

School is one of the few places that can provide opportunities for non-standard dialect speakers to not only learn but have opportunities for using proper English. Yet, at the same time, it is a social situation in which student speakers have the challenge of a dual audience: teacher representing one speech community, peers representing another. In one small example, White linguist Roger Shuy remembers himself responding to a teacher in the give and take of classroom recitation with a hybrid utterance:

Personally, I can remember very clearly my school conflicts between peer pressure and teacher expectations. One strategy to avoid this conflict is to give the right answer to
the teacher but to do so in either nonstandard or informal English. (1981)

For teaching suggestions, see two post-Ebonics-controversy books: one edited by two African American educators (Perry & Delpit, 1998, the other by a bi-racial trio of linguists (Adger, Christian, & Taylor, 1999).

Genres Genres are types of multi-sentence oral or written text structures that have become conventionalized for particular purposes with expected organizational patterns, as well as language features that are described below under register. Whenever children first encounter formal schooling, they have to learn the special ways of speaking, and the all-important rules, more implicit than explicit, for staying silent in voice and body (Shultz, 2009). One well-researched primary-grade oral genre focuses individual Sharing Time narratives. See Michaels (1981) for a detailed linguistic analysis of conflicts between teacher and African American students over appropriate narrative form, and Cazden (2001, chapter 2, for subsequent research).

There are also group oral genres into which students become socialized. One familiar oral genre in formal schooling around the world is what is often referred to as the default option of classroom recitation: the IRE/F of teacher Initiation, student(s) Response, teacher Evaluation/Feedback (Cazden, 2001, chapter 3). Some reading comprehension interventions require socialization into carefully designed oral genres for both teacher and students: e.g., Questioning the Author for non-fiction texts, Shared Inquiry for fiction. Michaels and Cazden (in press) report a comparative description of the two programs, each with fourth-grade students.

Explicit genre teaching is more commonly involved in helping students write individual compositions. One recent Australian guidebook for teachers, Reading and Writing with Understanding (Hampton & Resnick, 2009) describes five genres that fourth and fifth graders should become able to read and write: informational, argument, narrative, poetic, and blended (called elsewhere multi-genre) texts.

Another educational linguists have been influential in offering English-medium schooling detailed analyses of both genre structures and their linguistic features, drawing on Michael Halliday’s linguistics (2004). Derewianka (1990) succinctly describes seven text types: recount, narratives, reports, procedures, arguments, discussions, and explanations. Christie and Derewianka (2008) provide more detailed analyses of genres for language arts/English, history, and the sciences. They also provide a valuable chronological chart of the “Developmental trajectory in writing.”

While this Australian work has been criticized as overly prescriptive, we can learn from it more rigorous analytical categories, while retaining a more critical stance toward implications for pedagogy (as Ivanic suggests below).

Registers Registers refer to the language features with which people speak or write in specific recurring situations. Children’s earliest socialization often includes some register variations—for example, learning the modifications expected when talking to grandparents. Surprisingly, even preschool children also gain knowledge of how people speak in certain adult roles they have observed but not enacted in reality. Anderson (1978), for example, reports experimental research in which 4- to 7-year-old children demonstrate their knowledge of relational identities—giving a doctor puppet lower pitch and more imperatives and questions when talking to the nurse puppet, and the nurse more polite requests back to the doctor. Through their puppets’ speech, the children are displaying common gender stereotypes of roles but accurate role relationships of power.

Well known to teachers are the different registers in different curriculum subjects, most obviously in specialized terminology. For language arts teachers, grammatical terms are needed for discussing the multiple expressive options available to writers. Because the standards set by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics include a focus on being able to communicate about problem-solving processes, math discourse research more often identifies features of the math register. Two examples exemplify the complementary socialization processes of immersion in a community of practice plus explicit teaching.

One example quotes two third graders’ responses to the problem posed by their teacher to “find the difference between the height of two children, Jorge and Paolo…”:

Several children offered answers before the teacher gave any comment:

Roberto: I shrunk the big guy down by taking away the little guy from him [pointing to his drawing of Paolo and Jorge]…

Maria: I subtracted Paolo from Jorge like Roberto did, but….

Ms. Hudson: Can someone tell how Roberto’s and Maria’s methods are alike?… (Heibert et al., 1996).

Both children’s formulations accurately describe what they (correctly) had done, but only Maria uses the mathematical term “subtracted”, thereby shortening her description from Roberto’s 14 words to 5. The teacher chose to discuss how the answers were functionally alike, rather than call attention to one child’s use of a technical term, at least not at this time—thus providing only a situated immersion experience for Roberto and the rest of the class.

The second example comes from the fifth-grade teacher who is also the first author of the research report (Lampert, Rittenhouse, & Crumbaugh, 1996). Here the problem posed was to state the rule for getting from the numbers in the first column to their corresponding “outputs” in the second column: $8 - ? = 4$ (first of 4 equations).

Ellie was the first to speak:

Um, well, there were a whole bunch of—a whole bunch of rules you could use, um, divided by two. And you could do, um, minus one half.
An immediate gasp after Ellie’s answer led to an extended discussion, facilitated by probing questions from T. Finally, the teacher (T) concludes by explaining to Ellie and the class the importance of language conventions in mathematics:

T: One of the things that is kind of a convention in mathematics is that when we just talk about numbers and we don’t associate them with any object or group of objects, that the symbol means half of one whole. So if, if you were gonna communicate with the rest of the world who uses mathematics, they would take this [pointing to the expression “8 – ½” on the chalkboard] to mean eight wholes minus one-half of a whole. OK, Ellie?…

Ellie: That’s what I meant, but I couldn’t put it in there, but that’s what was in my mind.

In this example, the teacher decided to use this immersion moment for some explicit teaching about the conventions of mathematical language. Note especially that she explained the reasons for the conventionalized usage. One can imagine that the preceding extended discussion implicitly demonstrating the communication problems that can otherwise result should make that teaching most likely to be understood and internalized.

In a later interview, Ellie expressed her discomfort at being the focus of extended student discussion that included reasoned civil argument, a group oral discourse genre the teacher had carefully socialized her students into (Lampert et al., 1996, p. 742). Ellie did not express discomfort with the teacher’s suggested terminology per se, but another example shows that learning unfamiliar language, or simply using the preferred academic term, can awaken identity issues for the learner.

One semester in my graduate course on Classroom Discourse, Alaskan Native teacher Martha Demientieff introduced her take-home exam with an unusually thoughtful reflection:

As I began work on this assignment, I thought of the name of the course and thought I had to use the word discourse. The word felt like an intruder in my mind, displacing my word talk. I could not organize my thoughts around it. It was like a pebble thrown into a still pond disturbing the smooth water. It makes all the other words in my MIND out of sync. When I realized that I was using too much time agonizing over how to write the paper, I sat down and tried to analyse my problem. I realized that in time I will own the word and feel comfortable using it, but until that time my own words were legitimate. Contrary to some views that exposure to the dominant culture gives an advantage in learning, in my opinion it is the ownership of words that gives one confidence. I must want the word, enjoy the word, and use the word to own it. (Demientieff, 1988, term paper, Harvard Graduate School of Education, emphasis in the original)

Unfortunately, we don’t have information on Demientieff’s educational and language development. We can only admire the positive strength of her identity in all of Gee’s aspects:

• density of clause structure,
• verbs about relationships between abstract entities and mental activities,
• complex nominalizations and nominal groups,  
• present tense for timeless truths, declarative mood, and modality expressing certainty,  
• vocabulary with high frequency of Graeco-Latin words.  
(Ivanic, pp. 259–273)

Among additional features Ivanic found, three can carry implications for the writer’s expressed identity. First-person pronouns are rare. Citations to other literature can be used to define one’s reference group. And most interestingly, putting quotation marks around some terms can mark them as somehow atypical to the writer(s) familiar idiom, as Dementieff put the term “discourse” in italics. (Quotation marks not used for direct speech are sometimes appropriately called “scare quotes.”)

In another study, Freeman and Cazden (1991) analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively such quotation marks in 20 papers by students in a master’s program in foreign language teaching. Here they seemed to express a shared positive reflexive attention to language use that was highly valued in the program, and thus demonstrated their developing membership in that community of practice. (In this study Freeman was the teacher-researcher, analyzing the professional development program he helped design, while Cazden was an outsider researcher. Cazden, 2003, argues for the beneficial complementarity of these two writing positions for research on racial issues in schooling.)

Ivanic’s language analyses derive from Michael Halliday’s functional grammar that is less well known in the United States than in England and Australia. But she makes clear her ambivalent stance toward Hallidayan theories of language:

While I have adopted Halliday’s functional grammar as an analytical tool, I am not adopting along with it his view that particular contexts of situation require or prescribe particular linguistic features. Rather I want to show … that some discourse practices, with their associated values and beliefs, are extremely pervasive in the academic community, and … that there is, nonetheless, variation in these practices, and that they are open to contestation and change.  

A Final Consideration

Consider once more the two common terms in this chapter’s assigned title, learning and acquiring, plus the more recent umbrella term, socialization. Think of the agents of the verbs: acquire, learn, and socialize. The grammatical subject of the first two, acquire and learn, is the learner; but the grammatical subject of socialize is the parent, teacher, or community of practice, whose actions can help or hinder the learner(s) further language development.

There can be a danger in the shift to thinking of pedagogy in terms of socializing practices, the danger of implicitly assuming that what socializing agents do determines the effects—that, in a word, teaching produces learning. We may forget that the true agents of acquiring new forms and uses of language are, inevitably, in the end the students themselves. It couldn’t be otherwise when language use, and therefore language learning, are so intimately related to identity.

References


University Microfilm #78-8755.


Courtney B. Cazden