



# Poverty and Empowerment Discourse: Observing Agency and Authentic Language Use in a Dual Language Immersion Classroom

Lauren E. Johnson<sup>1</sup>, Alessandro A. Rosborough<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

*The purpose of the study was to explore and describe how empowerment and poverty discourse occurs in a dual language immersion (DLI) classroom. Naturally occurring discourse was collected in a third-grade DLI program using the Utah Model. Using Vygotskian sociocultural theory (SCT), empowerment and poverty were viewed through the characteristics of agency and authenticity in the language learning process. Findings from two tasks, mirroring and partner talk, demonstrate and provide a sample of how both poverty and empowerment were displayed in the classroom. The data provided evidence of discourse filled with poverty, where agency and authenticity in the target language were not well provided in the tasks. Conclusions and implications suggest prescribed tasks and procedural language are not conducive to learning a new language in authentic and agentive ways in DLI classrooms.*

**Keywords:** Empowerment/Disempowerment discourse; Second language learning; authenticity; agency;

## 1. Introduction

Currently, dual language immersion (DLI) schools are growing at an unprecedented rate in the United States, with the state of Utah being the leader per capita in 2015. According to Center of Applied Linguistics, DLI programs were designed to provide English learners (ELs) language and content instruction through two languages to support bilingualism and biliteracy needs. However, research concerning DLI programs, particularly natural discourse as occurring in the classroom, is very limited and needs to be addressed [1].

Discourse in the classroom was evaluated through a Vygotskian [2] Sociocultural Theoretical (SCT) lens that views language as an activity and an intertwining of thought, feelings, identity, and development. In this theory, agency and authenticity are a full and important part of learning and development in a second language. This theory has been used to understand natural discourse, including speech, gesture, emotion, and identity, in second language learning elementary classrooms [3][4]. In addition, a critical pedagogical view of how language empowers or disempowers second language learning participants is highlighted, an area of need in educational research [5].

## 2. Literature review, theory and discourse in education

According to Foucault [6] (1977) all discourse is backed and infused with differing power positions. Some discourse may empower while others may cause a poverty, reduction, or imbalance between interlocutors. Additionally, in Vygotskian [2] theory, language may be used to support student agency in using a new language in a purposeful manner, including their social and identity needs [7], as well as socializations and power issues beyond the classroom [8] [9]. van Lier [10] promoted two key characteristics for evaluating empowering or poverty discourse: *agency* and *authenticity*. Discourse is empowering when it demonstrates and promotes a learner's agency or "contextually enacted way of being in the world." Authenticity has to do with the realization of "...a free choice and is an expression of what a person genuinely feels and believes" (ibid) in relation to being purposeful to the learner's life both in and beyond the classroom.

## 3. Methodology

This research examines what poverty and empowerment discourse looks like through a case study analysis of one dual language immersion classroom. A descriptive discourse analysis method [11] (Scollon & Scollon, 2006) identified social and equitable characteristics and attributes. The main focus evaluated language for supporting or removing agency and authenticity in the L2 teaching-learning

---

<sup>1</sup> Brigham Young University, United States

<sup>2</sup> Brigham Young University, United States



process. Specifically, two tasks were selected for analysis: *Mirroring* and *Partner Talk*. *Mirroring* is a technique that comes from *Whole Brain Teaching* [12] (Biffle, 2013), where the teacher tells the students, “Mirrors on,” accompanied by predetermined gestures (hand-signals), and then students mimic her gestures and words during the entire task. *Partner talk*, having students turn and share information to each other, is a common teaching strategy and used extensively as a way to promote language development. The study took place in third-grade Spanish-English DLI school in a rural setting that qualifies as a Title 1 school (low socio-economic status), with 12 Spanish and 12 English speakers, and a Spanish and English teacher with multiple years of experience.

## 4. Findings & Discussion

### 4.1. Mirroring

Concerning mirroring, analysis of speech and gesture showed that authenticity and agency were lacking during the task. Using the recordings and coded transcripts, students were found to repeat words as fast as possible back to the teacher as if it were a race. While many of the students kept the prosodic and rhythmic style of the teacher, differing students would check in-and-out of the mirroring process throughout the entire discourse. Additionally, during review with the teacher, it was noted that the class struggled to repeat phrases that contained the future progressive tense (e.g., “I am going to go” repeated as only “go to”). Also of interest was the lack of coordination between gesture and speech during the mirroring exercise. While gesture has been found to coordinate with speech most of the time [13], it was interesting to note that stroke beats and representational gestures by the teacher and students were typically mis-timed and uncoordinated with any particular word during the mirroring task.

Also, comparisons between Spanish-dominant speaking students and English-dominant speaking students demonstrated inequalities and a lack of agency and empowerment specific to the Spanish-speakers. Findings show how the teacher’s language and redirections did not empower a Spanish dominant student, but actually kept him from applying the comprehension he was demonstrating.

### 4.2. Partner Talk

The second task selected for analysis was *Partner Talk*, defined as any instance in which the teacher directed students to discuss something with a person near them. During math time, students in partner talk were given space to create their own dialogue, resulting in a unique and creative conversation concerning last year’s teacher, students who already learned that math concept, and what objects were part of that past experience with math (e.g., pictures, fruits, vegetables, and so forth). Only after taking ownership did students formally address the math problem. Not only were students able to recall past experiences, they also created [potential] future referencing points through their freedom and agency to create their own math dialogue. Such referencing becomes meaningful and more readily available as a resource in the future, rather than just talking directly about the math problem itself. Accordingly, this met van Lier’s [10] definition of agency and authenticity, where language use was owned by the participants and constructed in a manner that brought language learning and content together.

## 5. Conclusions and Implications

This study described poverty and empowerment discourse as it was seen in a dual language immersion classroom in Utah (i.e., Utah model). The research question of how agency and authenticity were observed in a third grade English-Spanish class through a case study methodology was applied to two common discourse practices, *mirroring* and *partner talk*, both tasks that occur almost daily throughout all the data. Using a Vygotskian SCT lens, findings suggest that practices that contain prescribed or pre-scripted steps, such as the *mirroring* task, were not conducive to empowering discourse for the students, nor it demonstrate evidence of assisting the students in being more agentive in their new second language. In contrast, *partner talk*, provided evidence of discourse that did not initially look like communication was directly on task but with student agency, provided background contextualization from which the task started. Overall, much of the classroom discourse was found to constrain and devalue agency and authentic language learning for the students. Hence, the central mission of meaning-making and understanding of new concepts and experiences in a new language (i.e., the very purpose of DLI programs), can be quite inhibited when implementing practices that preference control techniques over



agentive and authentic L2 learning. Further study of these issues should be made if we are to provide more empowerment for marginalized populations learning a new second language.

### References

- [1] Henderson, K. & Palmer, D. "Teacher and student language practices and ideologies in a third grade two-way dual language program", *International Multilingual Research Journal*, 9(2), (2015), 75-92.
- [2] Vygotsky, L.S. "Thought and language", Cambridge, MA: MIT Press Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, (1986).
- [3] Rosborough, A. "Gesture, meaning-making, and embodiment: Second language learning in an elementary classroom", *Journal of Pedagogy*, 5(2), (2014), 227-250.
- [4] Rosborough, A. "Understanding relations between gesture and chronotope: Embodiment and meaning-making in a second language classroom", *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 23(2), (2016), 124-140.
- [5] Stetsenko, A. "The transformative mind: Expanding Vygotsky's approach to development and education", NY:NY, Cambridge University Press, (2017).
- [6] Foucault, M. "Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison", Translated by Alan Sheridan. London: Allen Lane, Penguin publishing, (1977).
- [7] Norton, B. "Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation (2nd ed.)", Bristol, UK:Multilingual Matters, (2013).
- [8] Dworin, J. E. "Listening to graduates of a K-12 bilingual program: Language ideologies and literacy practices of former bilingual students", *Gist Education and Learning Research Journal*, 5, (2011), 104–126.
- [9] García, O. "From language garden to sustainable languaging: Bilingual education in a global world", *Perspective. A publication of the National Association for Bilingual Education*, (2011), 5 – 10.
- [10] van Lier, L. "Interaction in the language curriculum: Awareness, autonomy and authenticity", USA: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, (1996).
- [11] Scollon, R. & Scollon, S. W. "Discourse and intercultural communication", In D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen, & H. Hamilton (Eds.), *The Handbook of discourse analysis*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., (2006).
- [12] Biffle, C. "Whole brain teaching for challenging kids", USA: Whole Brain Teaching, (2013).
- [13] McNeill, D. "Gesture and Thought", Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, (2005).