

Listening and speaking as powerful literacy practices

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to establish the significance of listening and speaking as key and powerful components of effective literacy practices. The analysis is based on the Neo-Vygotskian theory, and on the methodology of communication content analysis, and speech monitoring strategies in educational contexts. The nature of oral discourse is analyzed from a functional, an ontogenetic, and a phylogenetic perspective, but also as a tool of symbolic power and knowledge. The paper constitutes a theoretical meta-analysis of the subject. Listening and speaking as active literacy processes are discussed and two major models of oral communication are outlined, the dialogic and the transmission model. Finally, the paper presents research findings on effective literacy practices and formulates conclusions on the value of enhancing strategies that promote listening and speaking in literacy practices.

KEYWORDS

Listening, speaking, oral communication models, literacy practices

RÉSUMÉ

Le but de cet article est de souligner l'importance de l'écoute et du discours en tant qu'éléments clés de pratiques d'alphabétisation efficaces. L'analyse est basée sur la théorie néo-Vygotskienne et la méthodologie des techniques d'analyse des contenus de la communication et du contrôle du discours dans des contextes éducatifs. La nature du langage oral est analysée d'un point de vue fonctionnel, ontogénétique et phylogénétique et comme outil de connaissance et de pouvoir symboliques. L'écoute et le discours sont examinés en tant que processus d'alphabétisation active et les deux modèles de base de la communication orale sont présentés. Enfin, les résultats de la recherche sur les pratiques d'alphabétisation efficaces sont présentés et des conclusions sont tirées sur la valeur de l'amélioration des méthodes de promotion de l'écoute et du discours dans l'éducation.

MOTS-CLÉS

Écoute, discours, modèles de communication orale, pratiques d'alphabétisation

INTRODUCTION

Orality is the means by which human relations and human community are formed. It precedes written discourse from a phylogenetic perspective, as oral speech is antecedent to written speech

in all linguistic communities, from an ontogenetic perspective, as all individuals learn to speak before learning how to write, unless hindrances of a pathological nature are present. Furthermore, it precedes from a functional viewpoint, as the more procedures of everyday life even in literate societies are performed by means of oral discourse, and from a structural point of view, as the development of writing is based on the phonological data of oral speech. Oral speech is referred to as the main and natural language, while writing as a secondary and artificial language. As Politis (2001) points out, orality is cultivated in an intimate setting and satisfies day-to-day needs, while written speech is usually a formal form of communication. Oral speech involves a system of parallel meanings and interpretations -body language, facial expressions, voice pitch- which lead to interlocutors conquering the meaning of the spoken word. Written speech lacks this characteristic and there is no guarantee for the author of a piece of writing that their work has been understood by their audience. With the written text, the listener becomes a reader who is able to return to the text and make a new attempt to understand, to compare, and to identify contradictions. Written discourse lacks immediate feedback. Despite its guaranteed consistency and perfection, the author can only guess at the reader's response.

Oral discourse is the kind of discourse by means of which interlocutors construct their social identity and play their social roles in the context of each and every interaction, resulting in human relations being maintained or undermined. It is the discourse of phatic communication, whereby literal meaning subsides so as to facilitate the interlocutors' acquaintance with one another and to heighten their sense of familiarity. Above all, oral speech is eminently the speech for formulating and negotiating opinions, and for expressing and exchanging emotions, which constitute the foundation of each and every communication act. It is aural speech, non-permanent, fluid, rhythmic, subjective, simultaneous, participatory, and communal (Ong, 2002). As Ong notes, "thought is nested in speech" (Ong, 2002, p. 73). In addition, oral speech is authentic, while written speech can be copied.

In ancient Athenian society, oral competence was deemed important, with special emphasis being placed on the value of persuasive argumentation in the context of public discourse. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato saw writing as a threat to the significance of human memory, as well as a threat to the education system, as written texts meant that students would receive a quantity of information without proper instruction (Chandler, 1995). Plato, nonetheless, was the first major Greek author to overthrow Homer's authority, liberating his fellow citizens from the magic of the epic through the literacy of alphabetic writing, which signified a notable change in the technology of communication (Gee, 1989; Havelock, 1963). Rousseau's view is also phonocentric. Rousseau asserted that "books teach us to talk about things we know nothing about" and that writing was bound to dehumanize language by separating writers from their texts. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) nostalgically associates the acquisition of writing with a loss of innocence, while Ong suggests that writing represents man's fall from the garden of Eden, albeit pointing out that "we must beware of the elusive quest for a lost Eden" (Ong 2000, p. 320).

This paper aims to establish the importance of listening and speaking as key and powerful components of effective literacy practices. The analysis is based on the Neo-Vygotskian theory and on the methodology of the communication content analysis, and speech monitoring strategies in educational contexts. The paper consists of four sections. The first section defines the main concepts and terms employed. The second section analyzes listening and speaking as active literacy processes, while in the third section oral communication is discussed as a tool of symbolic power in education. In the fourth section two major models of oral communication are outlined and research findings on effective literacy practices are reported. Finally, conclusions formulate the value of enhancing strategies that promote listening and speaking in educational context.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

Listening, speaking, oracy, and literacy constitute key components of educational practices and an authentic basis upon which the transmission of knowledge and ideas is made possible. *Listening* is a complex parameter of communication rather than a simple and natural hearing process. According to the Speech Communication Association, listening is the process of receiving and assimilating ideas and information from spoken messages. Effective listening involves both the literal and the critical understanding of ideas and information transmitted through oral speech (Smith, 1995).

As far as speaking is concerned, children's early words are connected with actions. They refer to names, social contacts and usable objects. As Miller notes, children talk about what they know. They tend to demonstrate a higher level of competence when talking about the present time, the here and now, while other types of speech acts, such as narratives, are harder for them to handle (Miller, 1995). Children have difficulty narrating events, even when these relate to their everyday experience, or to provide the necessary information for the listener to comprehend their narrative. They tend to use redundancy and abstract references, while the use of arguments comes with some delay (Kati, 1992). The concept of appropriation, introduced by the Neo-Vygotskian theory, refers to the meanings that children may extract when engaging with objects within their cultural context. In terms of school education, appropriation is mainly associated with concepts and ideas (Mercer, 1994). Similarly, Bakhtin adopts the concept of voice as a means of representing the mental presence of more than one individuals involved in the production of an oral or written text (Bakhtin, 1981). In the context of educational practice, appropriation suggests the reciprocity of teaching and learning. It refers both to the appropriation of teachers' ideas by students and to the appropriation of learners' ideas by teachers, a process necessary for cooperative learning to occur. For Newman, Griffin and Cole (1989) appropriation in the classroom regards a communication event whereby one person takes account of another's talk and transmits it in one's own talk but in a modified form.

The term *oracy* is used to denote the development of spoken language, it is an important aspect of language teaching to young learners, like literacy and numeracy (Bland, 2015). On the other hand *orality* is a broader term referring to the overall use of spoken language, especially in a culture, "Oracy is a word used to name a skill. Orality is a mode, it has been termed as "methods of remembering" (Bomer, 2010, pp. 205-207). According to Giannouloupoulou (2001, pp. 263-264), orality determines "the ability that is related to speaking and listening skills, and to the instruction in oral discourse aimed at the development of skills pertaining its use in various settings. It is based on the fact that oral texts also have systematic attributes of coherence and cohesion, that is, they have orality".

For centuries, language scholars looked at written texts. Recently, however, their attention has turned to the study of orality. This may be a reflection of two key parameters of the modern world, namely the cultural pluralism of modern societies -multiculturalism-, and the dramatic growth in technetronics -information technology and electronics. This is a pluralistic perception of literacy, which acknowledges that "different societies and social subgroups have different types of literacy, and literacy has different social and mental effects in different social and cultural contexts. Literacy is seen as a set of discourse practices, that is, as ways of using language and making sense both in speech and writing" (Gee, 1989).

Oral discourse and communication constitute key tools of literacy. *Literacy* might be defined as the ability to produce, understand, and use texts in culturally appropriate ways. Etymologically, "literacy" refers to the ability to read rather than write, to understand rather than to produce (Graddol, 1994). Literacy denotes the ability to read and the knowledge that comes with

it. However, in colloquial Greek, like elsewhere, the term “literate” refers to those who have had an education. Literacy is necessary for the development of science, history and philosophy and for the explicative understanding of literature, art, and language, including speech itself (Gee, 1989). The term practice is defined as “a recurrent, goal-directed sequence of activities using a particular technology and particular systems of knowledge”, and literacy as a socially organized practice: “not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use” (Scribner & Cole, 1981, pp. 236-237). Therefore, *literacy practices* take place in a social and cultural context, governed by power relations and shape the identity of the learners through the orality and the diffusion of knowledge.

LISTENING AS AN ACTIVE PROCESS

A holistic perception of language includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening is the most used aspect of language. As Smith notes, people listen more than they speak, they speak more than they read, and they read more than they write. The average individual engages in verbal communication activities for 70-80% of their waking hours. Of this, 45% involves listening, 30% speaking, 16% reading and 9% writing (Smith, 1995, p. 282). At the same time, research has shown that in the school setting students act as listeners for approximately 57.7% of classroom time. 63% of classroom time is occupied by the teacher speaking. Students use 80% of their oral discourse to answer questions posed by the teacher, while teachers allocate them little time to respond (Bellack et al., 1966).

Despite the prestige that oral speech has enjoyed since the times of Aristotle, as well as its recognition as a skill worth teaching, specialized instruction in listening has not been equally acknowledged. In the past, few educators and educational institutes supported strategies for teaching listening. In recent years, however, scientists and pedagogues have turned their attention to the listening process and are now discussing ways in which its performance can be improved (Smith, 1995). Listening, as mentioned earlier, is a complex parameter of communication rather than a simple and natural hearing process. It is an active process that the individual chooses to occur. Of the events that take place in his environment, the individual selects the ones to which he will direct his attention, which he processes and uses, and which he may even retain and combine with other bits of information that he has previously chosen to save in his memory.

Major impediments to active listening are the varying speeds of thinking and speaking, passive activity (listener-receiver), emotion-charged circumstances, and preparing for the response. Listening contents are defined as both aural factors, such as received information, sounds produced by the persons communicating, other sounds that may be deliberate or not, and non-aural factors, such as the speaker's appearance, their manners, the context, the circumstances, and the listener's personal expectations. Listening skills can be learned. Listening culture can be improved by means of memory enhancement exercises, knowledge acquisition, and deliberate listening acts. This is a promising feature for the educational process and the enhancement of this skill. However, the listening process can encounter difficulties, usually deriving from the listening subjects themselves. Such hindrances include listeners who do not actually listen but pretend to do so, selective listeners, who employ a kind of partial listening whereby they deliberately direct their attention to certain parts of the speaker's talk, and, finally, egocentric listeners, who regard themselves as the center of each and every transaction or activity (Smith, 1995). Pre-school children, with their egocentric way of thinking, fall into this last category.

The pedagogical value of listening lies in the fact that children, especially in the early stages of language learning, find it easier to understand what they hear than what they read. Through listening, they are exposed to a wide range of auditory experiences, which help them increase their knowledge of the potential of the language they are to be taught. However, despite constituting one half of communication, listening is the least taught of all core skills. Of all communication skills, listening is probably the principal skill when it comes to promoting effective communication at all levels. Active listening skills are conducive to information collection, empathy, evaluation of situations, and acceptance of people and ideas, while, at the same time, they can provide learners with a sense of pleasure and fulfillment.

LANGUAGE AS SYMBOLIC POWER

Oral discourse is the child's earliest medium for knowledge acquisition and exploration of the world. It constitutes an area where knowledge and comprehension are formed. A child's entrance into the school institution signifies their assumption of the role of learner. At the same time, it signifies the rigid discipline required in order for writing to be learned. Speaking, by contrast, "comes about with far less anguish than does writing. Writing, on the other hand, is learned by concentration or application, and it rarely becomes for any individual, even professional writers, so spontaneous or flowing as speech" (Ong, 2000, pp. 94-95). Oral speech and its mediation by the teacher puts the child in the position of subject-learner. The assumption of the role of learner is mediated through the school practice of orality (Mousena & Sidiropoulou, 2018).

The education system tends to devalue popular modes of expression and impose the recognition of one legitimate language. The systematic learning of the official language is the first coercion imposed by the school institution. According to Fairclough (2001, pp. 12-19), linguistic phenomena are social in the sense that whenever people speak or listen or write or read, they do so in ways which are determined socially and have social effects. His position is that, "language connects with the social through being the primary domain of ideology, and through being both a site of, and a stake in, struggles for power". The official language imposes itself on all subjects on the territory of a political unit as the only legitimate language, especially in formal situations (Bloomfield, 1958, p. 29). As Bourdieu (1991, p. 45) points out, "the official language is bound up with the state", and also "It is in the process of state formation that the conditions are created for the constitution of a unified linguistic market, dominated by the official language. Obligatory on official occasions and in official places (schools, public administrations, political institutions, etc.), this state language becomes the theoretical norm against which all linguistic practices are objectively measured". Finally, the state has its own body for imposing the state linguistic law, i.e., educators, who are authorized "to subject the linguistic performance of speaking subjects to examination and to the legal sanction of academic qualification" (Bourdieu, 1991 p. 45). Spolsky (2008, pp. 3-4) notes that,

"Language management can be directed toward socially and morally inappropriate goals, such as the homogenization and suppression of minority languages. [...] any language management is the application of power coming from authority, and has totalitarian overtones. It assumes that the language manager (government or activist or scholar) knows best and it is thus in essence patriarchal. Taking a liberal or pluralistic point of view, one would argue that people should be allowed free choice of language, as of religion, provided only that they do not interfere with or harm others. On this principle, individuals should also be offered an opportunity to acquire the language in which national and civic activities

are undertaken, and the language or languages which will provide them with access to economic success”.

The form of oral discourse most commonly encountered in educational practice is dialogue. The interlocutors' relationship in this process is an asymmetric one. The dominant interlocutor has longer turns and is in control of interruptions and corrections, thus putting at stake the dominated interlocutor's freedom of speech. The register is not necessarily formal but rules of linguistic politeness are generally observed. Within this context, educators and learners participate in a system of relationships of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991). As an authorized sender, the teacher fulfils his role as long as learners, the legitimate receivers of his speech, are willing to acknowledge him.

ORAL COMMUNICATION MODELS AND LITERACY PRACTICES

Two models of oral communication have been proposed for the systematic research of talk. The first one, the *transmission model* of communication views oral discourse as a medium for the transmission of information between a sender and a receiver. Although this model is held in high regard in educational practice, it fails to penetrate the complexity of oral discourse (Maybin, 1993). The second model, the *dialogic model* (Wells, 1992) draws on the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky and their constructive process of discourse. According to this model, understanding between interlocutors is constructed through dialogue and it is shaped by the social and cultural context of the interaction. Conversation is a complete system of mutual understanding.

The dialogic model can also be found in the work of Volosinov and Bakhtin, who suggest the existence of a chain relation between utterances and responses both within and across conversations (Maybin, 1993). “Bakhtin suggests that dialogues are set up within utterances by our taking on and reproducing other people's voices either directly through speaking their words as if they were our own, or through the use of reported speech”. This is a process of appropriating the voices of others while remaining responsible for our choices (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 341). According to Miller, what makes us understand utterances is not our dependence on linguistic rules, but the information we receive from non-linguistic knowledge. Moreover, speakers must also wish to be understood. Understanding what another individual says is a kind of problem-solving. Without cooperation for the formulation and solution of problems, language would be a useless tool of communication (Miller, 1995).

According to Volosinov, words are ideological signs that emerge from the social contact between individual consciousnesses. They are the purest and most sensitive means of social contact. Their main property is that, despite their interindividual nature, they are produced with the means possessed by the individual organism. Therefore, words constitute the semiotic content of individual consciousness. At the same time, words cannot be isolated from the specific social conditions in which they developed; in other words, they cannot exist as pure natural constructs, as animal cries. By the same standards, comprehension is viewed as the result of interaction between a speaker and a listener. True understanding is dialogic by nature. Meaning does not belong to a word itself, nor does it reside in either the speaker's or the listener's psyche. Rather, it is the result of a speaker-listener interaction produced through the content of a particular complex of phones. Like an electric spark which can only be generated when two opposite poles come into contact, the electricity of verbal contact provides the word with the light of meaning (Volosinov,

2000). For Vygotsky, Bakhtin and Volosinov language is socially and culturally shaped, and its use bears particular value judgements and commitments (Vygotsky, 1986).

Conversation is the principal day-to-day linguistic behavior. The Conversation Analysis method was developed in 1970 in order to explore how ordinary daily behavior is perceived. Recognizing the fluid nature of conversation, conversation analysts study the way in which interlocutors perceive structure and coordinate their behavior so that effective verbal exchange can exist. The key concepts of Conversation Analysis are coordination and collaboration. To understand how they operate, one should look at events of non-verbal communication. For example, when one person wishes to give an object to another person, the outcome of the action is dependent on the two persons' collaboration. Their behavior is familiar and predictable in its structure so that a communicatively successful outcome can be achieved.

Conversation analysis in the school setting aims to establish the types of conversation which most promote students' understanding of curriculum content. Most research focuses on teacher-learner dialogues (Barnes, 1976; Edwards & Furlong, 1978; Edwards & Mercer, 1987; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975), whereas learner-to-learner conversation has been addressed by a rather limited number of researchers. Research findings indicate that although students learn from their teachers, they learn better from their peers. Rabbi Chanina said: "I have learned much from my teachers, and from my colleagues more than from my teachers, but from my students more than from them all." (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Taanit, 7a). The orality movement emphasized the importance of oral discourse in the school context. Maclure (1994) attempted to specify the concept of orality and its types and to determine which of these types is promoted by the educational system. The four types of orality identified by Maclure are: orality for personal development; orality for cultural transformation; orality for learning; and orality for functional linguistic ability.

Holmes (2001) analyzes the conversation process between men and women, the patterns of turn taking, and those of interruption. As she points out, the beginning and end of telephone conversations have a similar typical structure. In addition, conversation analysts claim that the process of conversation is organized in a systematic way. What is being said is expressed in a specific order or in a specific arrangement. Despite this, however, the structure itself is never obvious. Participants must keep trying to comprehend, control or clarify what is going on while, at the same time, they adopt behaviors that can be understood by others.

Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) comprised a list of events that any model of effective conversation should include:

- Turn-taking occurs.
- As a general rule, only one person speaks at a time.
- Individuals take turns to speak for periods that vary each time. This is why a way must exist to determine when a speaker has concluded.
- Occurrences of more than one person's speaking at a time are common, but they do not last long.
- Transitions from one speaker to the next usually occur without any overlaps or gaps.
- Turn order is not specified in advance but varies.

In addition, eye contact and other non-verbal behaviors are important components of the conversation mechanism. Research has shown that women are interrupted more often than men and that, when both genders are involved, they end up speaking less than men. The same model has been observed in the school-room (Swann & Graddol, 1994).

Hymes suggests that language should be studied “as situated in the flux and pattern of communicative events” and he establishes the way in which the different layers of context in a specified social circumstance contribute to the meaning of the language used. With her account of literacy events and practices, Heath establishes how children are introduced into specific social practices and culturally valued ways of meaning construction. The ideas of Hymes and Heath suggest the constitution of meaning on the basis of contextual elements (Heath, 1983; Hymes, 1993 p. 12). They demonstrate the coalescence of oral and literacy practices, as well as the complexity of the use of language that children must learn, beyond its typical aspects. In a research conducted in schools to explore the structure and goals of unguided informal speech of children aged 10-12 in relation to meaning construction and comprehension, Maybin (1993) concludes that:

- The greatest part of talk is highly cooperative. Children complement each other's talk, while meanings are produced by cooperation and interaction.
- Talk, just like writing, can create and support a context beyond the here and now. At the same time, here and now is constructed and established through speech.
- The social and cognitive aspects of speech aggregate, that is, the same utterance can simultaneously serve a number of distinct cognitive and social objectives.
- Meanings and knowledge constructed by children are temporary and often competitive.
- Individual utterances lack clarity.
- Language is a source of meaning construction. However, far from being neutral, it contains specific values and presumptions.
- Children construct their speaker identity through the assimilation and reproduction of other speakers' voices.

We agree with the claims that children's use of language is faulty and of a lower quality than that considered essential for pedagogical purposes. On the basis of the dialogic model of communication, we emphasize the need for an abundance of resources that should be available to all children, and the considerable effort that children make in order to be understood during their conversations.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper is aimed at establishing the importance of listening and speaking as key and powerful components of literacy practices. Oral language and communication are the primary medium for the development of social and pedagogical relations and for understanding the world. It precedes written symbolic language from a functional, ontogenetic and phylogenetic perspective. In the school context, oral language acquires symbolic significance through the mediation of educational contents and the educational practices employed by educators. Research into communication analysis in school settings has established the importance of the enhancement of listening and speaking in order for positive literacy outcomes to be achieved. The dialogic model of oral communication is a powerful and useful means in the modern multicultural and technological environment, while the active listening and speaking skills cultivated in the school contribute to mutual understanding and social cohesion, both in school-room and in society.

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