

Talking in Class

A study of socio-economic difference in the primary school classroom

In this paper I consider the relationship between socio-economic background and the school experience of two groups of children. I seek to establish whether or not there are identifiable differences in the language of primary school children living in two demographically contrasting geographical areas and, if there *are* differences, how these differences might impact upon a child's capacity to access learning? In investigating these relationships I conducted semi-structured interviews with the two groups using the work of Bernstein as a starting point. I found that while the children in the first school, located in a largely less affluent area of Bristol appeared to lack confidence, extended vocabulary and often clarity in their speech, the children in the second school, located in a middle class, affluent area of the city appeared articulate, self- confident and in possession of a varied and extended vocabulary. While it is not appropriate to generalise from this small-scale study, these findings raise questions about the language children experience from an early age both in the home environment and at school and suggest that there is a significant part for schools to play in ensuring that they are not excluding some groups of children from participation.

Introduction

A glance at the date of this extract might, initially, suggest irrelevance:

The non-standard speaking child is expected to learn *more* than his standard-speaking peer. He has to translate his own speech into standard then represent it in writing. No wonder he gets behind! (Rosen and Rosen, 1973, p.267).

However, despite its age, I maintain that these words still resonate. The relationship between the language of 'non-standard speaking' children and their access to primary education remains a concern for primary school teachers and academics, a concern that has been reiterated over the subsequent four decades as this paper will show. This paper is a partial summary of the research I undertook for my Master's Degree and aims, through two case studies, to explore the differences in the language used at school by children from contrasting socio-economic backgrounds within the City of Bristol. It uses evidence from the case studies to consider implications of the impact of socio-economic status specifically on the language of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In discussing the differences in achievement between socio-economic groups Luke et al (2010) make reference to Olsen's work in claiming that, '...achievement differences may not stem from deep differences in ability or competence but from limited engagement with differences between schooling and students' everyday lives and cultures.' (Luke et al, 2010, p.158-9). In this paper I present the argument that differences in socioeconomic status are also associated with language, its use and development.

The cases – an overview

The first case (referred to as CSA) I present was located in the school in which I teach. The school is in South Bristol, an area that has been described as one of traditionally low aspiration in the context of the city (Raphael Reed et al, 2007) and its children are drawn largely from a white British background. The second case (CSB) was located in a school in a more affluent northerly area of Bristol, rich in what Gregory, drawing on Bourdieu, calls 'certain forms of cultural capital' (Gregory et al, 2004).

It is important at this early stage to acknowledge my 'insider' status during the work with the children of CSA where, at the time my research took place, the children knew me as teacher and Deputy Headteacher. This status immediately makes clear my positionality for the purpose of this research and is further established as the children described in CSB had not met me before. They had been told that I was a teacher from another school who had come to do some work with them. If the aims of my research had been to produce two sets of completely comparable data then my differing positionality during each study would have been highly problematic. However, *because* the research was aimed at considering the potential disadvantages faced by the children in my own setting, my insider position during CSA does not, I argue, compromise the integrity of my outcomes.

I also acknowledge the limitations of my research. I used two small groups of children for each case study and engaged with just one method of data collection. In retrospect I believe that a richer picture of each case would have been created had I included a non-participant observation in each setting; I

might also have talked to the families of children in each of the groups and conducted the study over a longer period of time. These approaches would have provided me with a wider evidence base from which to draw my conclusions. That said, I believe that this small scale study does make a useful contribution to the wider body of research into the area of children's language.

Initially my work was significantly influenced by Basil Bernstein's theories of restricted and elaborated codes (Bernstein, 1973). However, as my research progressed I engaged increasingly with the arguments surrounding the impact of poverty and socio-economic status on language presented by Bernstein's critics. With reference to and in support of Bernstein, Eke and Lee (2009) state that '...in a society organised around social class ... working class pupils, on the whole, will have access to a more limited range of knowledge than their middle class peers.' (Eke and Lee, 2009, p.9). Meanwhile, arguing against Bernstein's perspective, Tizard and Hughes (2007) make the claim for 'difference in frequency of certain types of talk' (Tizard and Hughes, 2007, p.130) as opposed to the quality of the talk itself. While much of Bernstein's data was collected in a controlled laboratory environment where situations were created as experiments, Tizard and Hughes' research engaged with *real life*. They observed mothers from both working and middle class families at home interacting with their daughters. The significant difference between the groups was the impact of social class on the sort of conversation that took place between the mothers and their daughters, with Tizard and Hughes claiming that working class children are not speech deficient and working from within a restricted code; rather their subject matter is socially distinct from that of their peers with more emphasis in the working class homes on the domestic and nurturing (Tizard and Hughes, 2007).

Despite my gradual shift away from Bernstein's theories of classification (indeed, in later years Bernstein distanced himself from his early work) the overarching theme for me was that in my own school and beyond I was noticing distinct differences in children's language and wanted to be able to interrogate these differences further in my own research. My professional role enabled me to 'listen radically' (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007) and really be able to consider not just *what* is being said by our children but to *hear how* it is being said. My aim was to establish how this 'saying' differs from that of children from socially contrasting backgrounds.

Structure of the interviews

Initially inspired by Bernstein's use of pictorial prompts to encourage dialogue in children of contrasting socio-economic groups (Bernstein, 1971), I provided a series of pictures and loose instructions. The activities that I conducted with both cases all surround the discussion of these sets of images and are as follows:

1. A set of pictures of food

These pictures showed :

- Two plates of fruit. One comprised strawberries, gooseberries, cherries, raspberries, blueberries, grapes and redcurrants. The other included bananas, apples, pears and a pomegranate.
- Two meals. One was a roast dinner comprising roast chicken, cauliflower cheese, stuffing, potatoes, green beans, carrots and gravy. The other was a salmon fillet resting on broccoli, carrots, capsicum and asparagus.
- An Eatwell Plate (NHS, 2011), the government recommended 'Balance of Good Health', which shows a pie chart of the 'five main groups of valuable

foods' represented by photographs of, for example, a bottle of milk, some cheese, cereals and vegetables.

- A photograph of a McDonalds meal. This was made up of a 'Big Mac' burger, a carton of fries and a fizzy drink

In selecting these images, I wanted to include a range of foods which might be within the children's experience and which they might be expected to recognise. The Eatwell Plate (NHS, 2011) is an image widely used in primary schools and McDonald's images are used extensively on advertising billboards. The children were each given one of these pictures to describe and, if they wished, comment upon.

2. *An untitled print by the artist Paul Rothko in black, indigo and grey blurred edged 'blocks'.*

I chose this picture as I was keen to observe how each group would interpret this abstract art in muted colours. The children were asked to tell me about the picture.

3. *A Christmas comic strip with empty speech bubbles.*

I chose this particular comic strip because of its seasonal relevance - the research took place in early December. The pictorial narrative suggests a scenario where Santa Claus is too fat to fit down a chimney and has to be helped along by his reindeer. To contextualise, Santa is first pictured eating 'hotdogs'. The children were asked to take turns to describe what was happening in each speech bubble.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed with pseudonyms used for all participants.

When the original research took place it was at an early stage in my dissertation preparation and I was satisfied that my methodology and materials were robustly fit for purpose having been, at this time, keen to follow arguments proposed by Bernstein; I state my reasons for choosing these images above. However, in the light of Bernstein's challengers I came to consider that perhaps some my tasks were culturally preloaded which impacted on my findings. This is particularly so in the context of the food section of the materials I used and I now question whether I was enabling or limiting the type of talk children used in a given setting. Perhaps by providing children with pictures of salmon fillets, olives and asparagus and a McDonald's meal I had already made my own subconscious value judgements based on the wider school context in which the case study children operate. In retrospect, perhaps, if the tasks had been different, for example a conversation based around technology used by children, the content may have been more accessible to all children and the task may have demonstrated keener differences in language, or even more confident language use by children in CSA.

THE CASE STUDIES

Case Study A

CSA was made up of two boys and three girls and, while not being particularly close friends, they had worked together in the one form entry school since they joined in Reception. The exceptions to this were Emma, who had joined at the end of Y1, and Jo, who had joined at the beginning of the school year in which this study took place. There should have been a third boy present but on the arranged day for the interview he was absent.

The interview took place in my office which is also a teaching space for small groups. The children had all been there before and settled comfortably into their seats, telling me that they enjoy working there because it is 'cosy' and away from the noise and activity of the main part of the school. There was a calm and attentive start to the session and we began by looking at the selection of food pictures.

Only Jo, the newest child, recognised and named the Eatwell Plate and identified various food groups. She named carbohydrates. The rest of the group were silent and, when invited, no one added further comments.

However, this changed when we moved on to the picture of the food from McDonalds. All of the children appeared to be exceptionally focussed and animated and the meal was described enthusiastically by Jon who labelled it a 'fat' meal and told me that he '...eats all that.' A conversation then took place around McDonalds food and all of the children stated that they enjoyed eating it and, given the choice, would like to eat it each day.

We then looked at the fruit pictures. Karl, responding to my enquiry, stated that 'it is a bowl of fruit...and vegetables'. I (LMS) asked him to describe what he saw:

Karl: Apples, pears, onions, plum

LMS: Where's the onion?

Karl pointed the pomegranate out to me.

LMS: Do you all agree that it is an onion?

All: Yes (unanimous).

Karl: It's a *red* onion.

(To which there was a general response of: yes / yeah.)

The above is an example of how the children consistently *agreed* with each other and, in this case, affirmed the mistake made – the identification of the pomegranate as an onion. This pattern of misinterpretation and consensus continued throughout the children's discussion of the other food pictures, and we can see this in a second example:

Emma: On that plate, it's blueberries, sprouts, cherries, blackberries and I don't like any of them.

I pointed to the gooseberries on this plate that Emma had called sprouts and asked her to remind me of their name.

Emma: Sprouts

All: Yeah *(apparently slightly incredulous that I didn't know)*, sprouts.

We moved on to look at the salmon accompanied by asparagus:

Lucy: It's salmon and there's broccoli, I don't like that and most of it's green and the salmon is squishing a lemon.

LMS: What is that called? *(pointing to the asparagus)*

Lucy: Is it a spring onion?

Karl: Yeah, I think so

Jon: Is it a runner..... no definitely not, it's definitely a spring onion.

The food items on these plates were distinctly less popular than the McDonalds meal, with several children telling me that there was 'no way' they would eat the salmon meal. Indeed one child told me – with others nodding in agreement – that '...fish has to be fried.' At one point Lucy pointed out that the fruit looked like it might be in a '...wooden thing... a wheelbarrow' and I nodded and gave an encouraging 'Go on' creating the opportunity for the children to develop this idea further (the fruit is in a bowl). However, someone shouted '...it looks like a truck. Smash it all up with a hammer.' When I asked what they meant the responses included glances at each other and shrugs. The conversation around food finished on a return to fast food and to the fact that on the whole Kentucky Fried Chicken was preferred to McDonalds; Jon pointed out that this is because there is '...a KFC really near and 'everyone can walk there'.

I had been noticing how the children appeared to be operating as a collective, within what appeared to be an accepted community and this 'sticking together' continued when we looked at the Rothko print. The children all described this abstract image in tangible terms: 'It's a phone'; 'It looks like a laptop'; 'It looks like a cloud'; 'It's got eyes'; and 'It's just a bit of paper, I don't know, a big rain cloud?' I had ensured that I did not influence the responses the children might give me by asking directly what they were seeing but all tried to attach the concrete to this abstract piece of art; none seemed able to see it as just that – a piece of art. I asked the children if any of them had seen this sort of picture before to which all said they had not. I then asked them if they had anything else to say about it to which one child replied that, 'It's just drops of paint, it's

colour...they might have used pencil.' Meanwhile the rest of the group remained silent.

Finally we looked at the comic strip. The first child started very hesitantly with a short, literal description of what she saw. Her speech was punctuated by several utterances of 'er' and she was very reluctant to elaborate. The second child showed more enthusiasm and I noted more confidence in her delivery. She showed some animation, using the adjective 'massive' when describing Santa's bag:

Lucy: Er... Santa sat down eating a hot dog on Christmas Eve and here are, er, reindeers at the window and there's a piece of cake, er a calendar...

Emma: Santa's with his reindeers and he's got er his, his ... reindeers and he's like setting off all from the snow on a sleigh and he's got a massive bag with presents and he's not looking what he's doing.

Jo: Erm... Santa got stuck in the chimney and his reindeer are trying to get him out and there's a present and he's asking for help and he's puzzled 'cos his reindeer's, like, kicking the chimney in. It's breaking and there's lots of snow.

Lucy: Erm... he's just fallen down the chimney... (*here the children were whispering words for Lucy to use as she stopped talking*) and there's a stocking and a bowl of fruit and two candles and er...

Carl: There's a Christmas tree and he's delivering presents to the house and he's walking and he should of (sic) got a phone...

The commentary generally continued like this and Jon, again, became most excited, his vocabulary including such words as 'puzzled' with some inclusion of compact sentences.

Case Study B

While CSB had been told that I am a teacher they had no further details and had not met me before. I spent five minutes with the group chatting generally in a corridor area while the rest of the class moved into the hall to watch the dress rehearsal of the KS1 Nativity Play. The children were very excited because they had been told by the Headteacher that as recompense for missing the dress rehearsal they were to be given 'VIP' seats at the following afternoon's performance to parents.

CSB comprised three girls and three boys selected from across the two Y5 classes. This school is larger than CSA's school and the children had not been together in the same way since Reception. Additionally, three of the children had joined the school later than the rest of the group. This suggests that relationships were, perhaps, not established over time.

We moved into a vacant classroom to start the recorded interview and looked at the pictures of the chicken and salmon meals. All of the children spoke confidently and knowledgeably about the food in the pictures. All food items were clearly identified by name, and discussion indicated that all of the items

were regular fare in the homes of the children. Debate arose when the children were looking at the stuffing on the plate containing the roast chicken:

Anna: Hmmm ... a brown thing with white stuff on it.

Clare: It looks like prawn toast.

Anna This looks like what my granddad eats when we go to our house in France.

Next, Clare picked up the picture of the fruit basket containing the gooseberries and named all fruits on it *except* for the gooseberries. While she was speaking the other children were arguing very confidently with one another in the background, their language was precise and considered: 'I think this is a gooseberry not an olive because it is in a basket with a selection of other fruits – an olive would not belong there' and without the interjection of 'er' or 'um'.

I asked the next child, Martin, to tell me about the second bowl of fruit:

Martin: Well... I have a green banana – which you can cook – apple, pear and a green pear.

In the background other children can clearly be heard:

All: It's not a pear, it's a marrow'.

Martin: Oh, a marrow, and a pomegranate and

When Martin made this change to 'marrow' the other children, led by Paul, laughed and interjected ...'It's not a marrow, we made it up, God you're so *gullible*, Martin.'

The children in this group demonstrated a wider vocabulary than CSA (for example the use of the word 'gullible') and their sentence structure adhered to the conventions of Standard English (I witnessed no 'should of' in the CSB interviews). Additionally, CSB were certain and assured in their own responses. They were not dependent upon one another for affirmation nor did they appear supportive of each other in terms of helping each other out.

Following this we looked at the Eatwell Plate. While none of the group named it as the Eatwell plate they talked confidently about the food groups referred to, often raising their voices over each another:

Martin: Ok, I have the food chain and on it it's got...

Anna ...the two biggest groups are bread which is a carbohydrate and cereals and potatoes and in the other group is fruit and v...

Clare but...the smallest one is fat and cheese

Rob ...that's calcium – dairy.

Between them, and without being prompted by me, the group, talking over each other, named all of the items on the picture. I asked if they were familiar with these foods from their meals at home and all said, apparently surprised by my question, yes.

The photograph of the meal from McDonalds elicited little response but one of the children picked up the picture and named all of the food groups. He said that the burger was in a sesame bun. I asked them what they thought of McDonalds and did they enjoy eating there. Of the six children two said 'never',

one vehemently stating how she 'hated' the food. Three told me they eat there occasionally. The other child, Rob, said he eats there every day to which his peers called him a 'liar' and that there is 'no way' he would go there so frequently.

When shown the Rothko print the children appeared to be familiar with this kind of image. One of the children named the artist as Rothko and said 'I *think* we looked at some of these pictures when we were in Y4'; however this was not agreed across the group. Several of the children used the words 'abstract art' when discussing it and talked about how it makes one feel: 'It makes you feel down because of all the grey in the picture'. Some discussion continued around the idea of the work being abstract and Paul made the point that 'This is the sort of art that my mum likes but I wouldn't buy it myself.'

Finally, we moved to the discussion about the comic strip. When I asked the children to discuss a picture each the group talked over one another, contradicting each other's ideas. What was noticeable, however, was the apparent confidence with which the children spoke about the comic strip. Again there was little interjection of 'er' or 'I don't know' and the children all inserted dialogue into their commentary in the voice of a speaker, for example when Santa gets stuck in the chimney, one of the children used the supposed voice of a reindeer to ask 'Santa, why are you so *fat*?' another said 'Let's go people and put some presents out, we're making children happy, yeah?' One child suggested that Santa is annoyed with one of the reindeer and says, 'At last I've finished with that senile reindeer' to which another asks what senile means and a suitably plausible reply was given. I noted this as one of the few non-confrontational verbal interactions amongst the group. At this point the children

were laughing and talking over one another, fixated on Santa's caricatured obesity. The children's self-confidence and their unquestioning assumption that they had something worthwhile to contribute contrasted sharply with the apparent hesitance and uncertainty of CSA.

Findings and analysis

The data produced by these case studies, and my subsequent analysis took me beyond the discussion of language that is given below. It guided me towards the consideration of language within a community and it led me to reflect upon the kinds of experience with which CSB's language was imbued. It also encouraged me to reconsider the impact of some of our practices in terms of how children experience the curriculum in my setting. However, for the purposes of this paper I concentrate on the following overarching 'findings' in terms of the language and vocabulary used by the children:

- Throughout the interview, when CSA had nothing more to add they stopped talking and/or shrugged; CSB talked constantly.
- CSB's talk moved easily between colloquialisms such as 'like' and 'man' and Standard English while CSA's vocabulary was more consistently colloquial.
- CSB's talk, unlike CSA's, was heavily punctuated with pauses, 'er' and 'you know.'
- When discussing the Rothko print, CSA searched for the literal and tangible in the picture. CSB, however, engaged in analysis.

Both cases used contemporary cultural colloquialisms in their speech such as 'yeah' and 'like', 'man' and 'cool'. However, CSB's talk swiftly moved between these cultural colloquialisms and Standard English while CSA's remained in the

colloquial and was tied to the immediate context. When CSA discussed the comic strip, for example, their language was exclusively contextual, reliant upon knowledge of the pictures being described to elicit understanding in a third party. We could see this in terms of Bernstein's original theory that users of the elaborated code have access to both restricted and elaborated codes whilst users of the restricted code have access to just that code; elaborated code users are equipped to move between codes easily (Bernstein 1973).

Alternatively, as Maybin (2007) suggests, children might ally or remove themselves from others through subtle shifts and cadences of speech within a social context. We might consider this alongside Bernstein's codal theories in that while the latter might partly explain the embedded social foundation of their existence in a language community, children might also be aligning themselves to their peer groups and hence reinforcing their linguistic social positioning.

CSA's talk was heavily punctuated with pauses, 'er' and 'you know' and their language was often localised. Their choice of vocabulary was linked to their immediate experience and they used dialect, e.g. referring to the 'slider' (for slide) in the park, and mum doing the shopping at 'Asdal' (the south Bristolian idiosyncrasy of adding the letter 'l' to words ending with an 'a'). The children's confidence in their assertions wavered when they were not talking about objects or events related to their immediate experience. This reflects Hasan's theory of a 'speech community' (Hasan, 1973, p.266) where language is situated within the experiences and boundaries of the direct community in which one exists. Tizard and Hughes' (2007) study of conversations between mothers and daughters demonstrated, they claimed, how daughters of the 'working class' families were able to communicate but used speech associated with domestic contexts. It seemed that, in a similar way, talk by children in CSA was related to

the local community, whereas CSB may have experienced talk in the home and elsewhere that exposed them to ‘...a wide range of general knowledge and information and extending their vocabulary’ (Tizard and Hughes, 2007, p.130).

When both groups were discussing the Rothko print there was a sharp contrast between their modes of analysis. CSA constantly searched for the literal and tangible in the picture and once they had exhausted their ideas about what it might ‘be of’ they fell silent. CSB, meanwhile, engaged in discussion and interpretation. It seemed that the children had the available resources, including knowledge of art, and experience of seeing art exhibited, combined with the appropriate language with which to talk about this print. As I listened to their discussion Bernstein’s work surrounding accessing codes resonated, particularly in terms of how these children with their confident speech and their nascent cultural understanding, possessed knowledge Bernstein described as ‘universalistic’. (Bernstein, 1973). Yet also, in their own way, they were using a restricted code, albeit a *different* one as their discourse assumed a set of shared values and understanding which may not have been available to the children of CSA.. Writing about Bourdieu, Reay (1999) refers to linguistic capital, the manifestation of cultural capital in discourse, and how linguistic capital is so much more than vocabulary. It is the delivery and self-belief beyond the words that impact (Reay, 1999, p.162). This self-belief did not seem evident in the talk amongst children in _CSA.

Conclusions

In this small scale research I have attempted to unpick the differences between the language of groups of children from two contrasting socio-economic groups. While I acknowledge the limitations of this study, specifically in terms of breadth and methodology, the findings raise questions about how schools respond to these differences. This may require more explicit and far reaching debates about how best to support the use of language in primary school classrooms.

It is clear from the evidence presented that there was significant variance in vocabulary between the two groups of children and it became apparent that the children in CSB possessed the confidence to robustly challenge each other's ideas. Tizard and Hughes' argue that it is the subject matter rather than the language itself that makes language used by the contrasting socio-economic groups 'socially distinct' (Tizard and Hughes 2007). Hasan talks of a specific 'speech community' (1973) while Maybin (2007) claims that children adapt their language according to their own consciousness of social context. It is possible to consider all of these perspectives alongside CSB's confident presentation and in doing so acknowledge that there are significant challenges for schools in terms of how certain activities and tasks commonplace in the primary classroom might be more successful in promoting talk in particular social groups than others. Similarly, examining the reactions of the case study children during the interviews it may be the case that certain resources and choices of activities may favour one social group above another. If so, this has major implications for teachers, raising the question, do children need to be supported to gain access to the vocabulary and the way language is used that is valued in schools? If what Connie and Harold Rosen stated in 1973 is still the case and

the ‘...non-standard speaking child is expected to learn *more* than his standard speaking peer.’ (Rosen and Rosen, 1973, p.267) it is imperative that more explicit and far reaching debates about how best to support the use of language in primary school classrooms take place.

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