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CONSTRUCTING 'LINGUISTIC MATURITY': INTERACTIONS AROUND WRITTEN TEXT IN THE PRIMARY CLASSROOM

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1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a plethora of legislation on education and consequent changes in assessment practices in England and Wales. However, Bernstein (1990) warns us to ask of any change what has remained unchanged; and in this unchanged context, to ask in whose interests the changes are likely to be. To look at what remains unchanged, we need to consider the interests that lie behind the knowledge we produce as academics. Foucault (1977) writes of 'discursive formations' as historically determined regularities in discourse which maintain power relations. Forms of knowledge produce technologies which construct ways of perceiving the world, thus helping to maintain power relations.

One widespread discursive formation is that which biologises achievement, locating achievement inside the individual rather than within social relations; foreclosing the examination of why some people achieve more than others in academic contexts by positing innate abilities and deflecting attention from pedagogy. Primary pedagogy remains premised on the expectation of finding different levels of ability in any classroom (Bourne 1988, 1993). This assumption is reinforced through an array of disciplinary theories, each providing techniques for categorising and differentiating between pupils. One such theory is that innate developmental patterns constrain what can be mastered by the learner. Gallaway and Richards (1994) call this 'learnability'. This has led to the elaboration of further theorising about 'teachability' (Pienemann 1984), covering what can and what cannot be taught according to the stage of a child's development. Concepts such as 'learnability' have come to construct ways of assessing achievement and 'teachability' to limit the giving of feedback to children on

their performance. In this paper I want to re-examine one still widespread nativist developmental concept, that of linguistic maturity (Bloom 1993; Pinker 1994). I shall do this by looking at children's written texts in the context of their production.

Unlike the secondary phase, research studies have shown that in the British primary school comparatively little time is spent overall in communications with the whole class. Rather, most focused teaching on literacy has taken place in teacher consultations with individual pupils. Research into these individual teacher/pupil consultations is, then, of vital importance in coming to understand the transmission of knowledge. This paper studies one aspect of the interaction between teacher and pupils around text in the primary classroom. Detailed study of teacher-pupil spoken interaction around text in this same classroom is included in Bourne (1992).

I want to examine some children's writing as produced in a multilingual urban class of nine year olds, where I carried out a year long ethnographic study (see Bourne 1992 for details). From the class I selected eight children's work over a school year for detailed comparison. These included children with English, Cantonese, Bengali (Sylheti), Vietnamese and Farsi home language backgrounds. Three were born in England, three in Bangladesh, one in Hong Kong and another in Afghanistan.

Examples of three of the children's texts are given in Appendix 1. According to their teacher, these children represented a cross section of her classroom, from those considered 'bright' to those 'needing support'. (The teacher's perceptions of children's 'abilities' were her own constructs, which were elicited using Personal Construct Theory techniques (Bannister – Fransella 1986).) Attainment was considered to be essentially the result of innate developmental sequences. The teacher operated unconsciously with the idea that first language background would not affect developmental sequences in writing in the second language (an idea which receives research support from, e.g., Pienemann 1984; Lightbown – Spada 1990). She also operated on the understanding that children had to be 'ready' to be taught new forms and new ways of using written language. Those she considered 'bright' she also considered 'ready' to learn to order their texts more thoughtfully; others were not 'ready', and with these she focused more on content than on form.

Looking at the texts in Appendix 1, however, at first sight all the children's work in the classroom appears very similar in quality. All the children produce some 'non-standard' features, as might be expected of developing bilinguals. It is the *quantity* of writing produced which seems to be the most striking difference between the children considered 'bright' and those considered 'slower' (see differences in the total number of words in each text in Appendix 2). However, I want to show how one can use the 'technology' developed by theories of language education to produce (or construct) different levels of 'linguistic maturity' for these children, thus suggesting that differences in their attainment are 'innate'. In contrast, I shall suggest that differences in attainment were socially constructed through interactions with the teacher.

2. Indicators of 'linguistic maturity'

The idea of a developmental course of early language acquisition (Pinker 1984) has been extended in pedagogic contexts into analyses of later literacy development and into explanations for differential attainment. For example, Perera (1984) argued that analysis of children's texts can show which children are more 'linguistically mature' than others by charting a 'developmental' course of acquisition. Like many others who study first language acquisition, Perera assumes gradual approximation to 'adult constructions', which she defines as those forms which 'appear late and rarely in children's language'. Perera (1984) considered two indicators of 'linguistic maturity' as consistently reliable: frequency of use of expanded noun phrases (NP) in subject position (1984: 226) and use of a variety of adverbial clause types (1984: 235). A rough count of such expanded noun phrases in writing completed over a year suggests that the pupils considered 'bright' produced more than the others, although the results do not distinguish those children the teacher thought most 'bright' among the 'brighter' group (Appendix 2). The only monolingual child in the 'bright' group, Nicola, used comparatively few of such forms, although she showed she could do so (seven instances). This suggests that because a child does not choose to use a form, we cannot assume that they could not do so if they wanted to. One needs to consider children's wider repertoire.

Perera (1984) also suggests there is a 'developmental' sequence of production of adverbial clause types: first, time, reason and condition; then (in order) place, result, purpose, manner, condition; and, finally, concession. She cites Kroll et al. (1980) who found numerous instances in nine year olds' writing of time, reason and condition type clauses; some clauses of purpose and result; however place and manner clauses were rare. This suggests that at nine years, only a small 'able' group use the more unusual types.

The use of these structures in my study fits this pattern (Appendix 2). Length of time in an English school does not seem significant in developing use of these forms. But frequency of use does match the teacher's assessments of 'brightness'; with the 'bright' group showing greater frequency of use, and a wider range of clause types. However, this must be seen in relation to the fact that the group considered 'bright' simply wrote longer texts!

Four children attempted a wider range of adverbial clauses: Tuk (bilingual in Cantonese/English), Nicola (monolingual English), Ahmed (Farsi/English) and Nhan (Vietnamese/English), all rated as 'brighter' than the others. Somiron

(Bengali/English) also chose to produce three non-finite adverbial clauses of purpose, however. Each of these was produced in a similar context, recounting a process of construction: "*I put the cardboard under the table to kept the drawer in one place.*" She used a similar non-finite adverbial clause strategy to present reasons in some of her writing:

(1) "*I went to the playground and I saw the Fence then I came in the class and I drew the Fence I drew the fence I drewed the fence because it came on my mind then I drew the Fence. because I like to drew the Fence and it have square no (on) the Fence with the gaps no (on) it.*"

3. The process of writing

Examining Somiron's text, we begin to see what was happening when children wrote. Somiron's text is well worked over with her rubber, but shows traces of drafting and redrafting. Teacher comments are still visible on her texts. I also have observation notes and audiotranscripts of the children's conferences on their writing with the teacher. These reveal a demand on the writer for elaboration: "*How*?" "*What did it look like*?" "*What was it for*?" Somiron has to respond to teacher questions in her text: why did she choose to draw the fence? "*Because it came on my mind.*" "What did it look like?" And so on.

Examining the process of classroom writing draws attention to the role of interaction. Let us take an example of a so-called 'linguistically mature' form, a non-finite adverbial clause of manner, found in Ahmed's writing: "*Stamen help other flower to be a life by giving pollen to bees to take it for other flowers.*" Examining his book we find that Ahmed had first written: "*Stamen help other flower to be a life.*" Beside this, the teacher wrote: "*How does that happen*?" Ahmed answered by adding to his text the following: "*by giving pollen to bees to take it for other flowers.*" Omitting the teacher's note, this sentence has gone into the final version. The sentence has thus been jointly constructed.

Nicola wrote: "*I had to be careful where I drew the pattern.*" The teacher wrote "*Why*?", and Nicola responds by adding a clause of reason to the text: "*because I might of some of the window panes gone wrong by puting a window in the rong place*".

However, the children do not always elaborate their work in response to the teacher; sometimes they simplify their writing. For example, Ahmed tries describing his chrysanthemum: "*The flower look like an sunflower but not the hole flower look like sunflower just the middle round circle looks a bit like sunflower.*" Having acquired a specialist term, Ahmed later simplifies "*the middle round circle*": "*The stamens look more like the round big sunflower.*" The teacher still asks him to clarify, so in the final version Ahmed drops the simile – a frequent response to a question from the teacher which a child found too difficult to handle, but a strategy chosen by some children more than others (Bourne 1992). This example is a salutary reminder that children may choose to use a simpler construction to avoid teacher questioning and the laborious redrafting of work. For some children the aim appears to be to write what the teacher will accept in as few words as possible, with as few 'mistakes' as possible, to avoid 'correction' by the teacher.

4. Teacher interventions

The teacher made three main types of pencilled questions on children's work. Firstly, questions requested expansion of the text ("*What do the insects want*?"). These focused on ideas, content. In response, the children simply added more sentences. The second type requested elaboration of the text: "*When?*" "*Why?*" "*How?*" These elaboration requests tended to elicit production of adverbial clauses. The third question type required children to shape the text, marking parts of the text which "go together", sorting out sentences under various subheadings: e.g., the look, the smell, the feel.

However, to get this sort of intervention, children needed to write a number of sentences. The evidence I collected showed that only certain children received 'shaping' comments. Most children received requests for elaboration, but a few children only ever received requests for expansion. For these children the writing process was one of accumulating sentences until at last the teacher was satisfied or time for the project ran out.

5. The differential production of 'maturity'

Let us look briefly at two examples of teacher/pupil interactions around text. Full transcripts and discussion can be found in Bourne (1992). Interactions with Tuk (assessed by the teacher as 'bright') were comparatively long. The teacher sat Tuk beside her in a quiet area of the classroom.

(2) Teacher: *But then you've said here "some of the lines are ..." You're still talking about the lines. And here you're talking about the spikes again.* (Long pause.) *I think all this is about what the shell looks like. Yes.* (Pause.) *Except this bit.*
Tuk: *That's what lives in it.*
Teacher: *That's what lives in it, isn't it?*

Throughout, the teacher signals acceptance of the child's contributions. Pauses allow the child to enter the talk, whilst not pressuring him. Tag questions invite participation. There are few direct questions or commands. Textual themes include consequence (*so*), contradiction (*but*) disjuncture (*except*), agreement

and doubt. The teacher models the way an ideal thoughtful writer would approach the writing process.

The teacher's interactions with Somiron are very different:

(3) Teacher: *Tell me what you wanted to say next about the shell.*
Somiron: *At the shell it have ... Part of the shell it have pattern.*
Teacher: *Outside the shell it has patterns on it. O.K.* (writes this down for her.)

The interactions are shorter. The teacher remains at her desk with Somiron standing beside her. There are more direct questions "*Are you trying to say ...?*" There are also more imperatives. Textual theme choices mark the introduction of new topics (*right, now*) rather than indicating the connections between topics, as with Tuk. The discourse is less inclusive (no *we* forms). The teacher is presented as authoritative. With Tuk, the positioning is one of complicity. While Tuk is required to redraft and reconsider his text, Somiron has a different task. The teacher says: "*You're going to carry on making up more sentences.*" It is clear that while Tuk gets considerable teaching on the construction of text, Somiron does not.

These examples illustrate the ways in which classroom practice can lead to the differential involvement of children in the process of reflecting on and constructing texts. Children themselves are actively involved in their own positioning through the choices they make in relation to the quantity of text they write and their willingness to take risks. (Bourne (1992) explores in some detail the children's own positioning while text is being produced, both with the teacher and at their own tables with their peers.) However, interactions with the teacher are highly significant. The weight of research into classroom interaction has tended to focus on whole class discussion situations. However, unlike the secondary phase, in the primary school comparatively little time is spent overall in communications with the whole class. Research into individual teacher/pupil consultations is of vital importance in coming to understand the transmission of knowledge.

6. Constructing the 'ideal pedagogic subject'

To conclude, I want to argue that the grammatical structures which are suggested to be indicators of linguistic 'maturity' are instead indicators of particular cultural values, transmitted differentially through the education system. Halliday (1990) argues convincingly that nominalisation (often an expanded noun phrase in subject position) is a marker of the dominant culture which moulds the way Western educated people think and behave in relation to the world. By looking for evidence of expanded noun phrases, we are not looking for linguistic

maturity but for signs that a child has assimilated the basic values of the education system.

Primary pedagogy in Western society also places an emphasis on reason, on purpose, on hypotheticality ('condition'), on consequence ('result') and on explicitness (the careful statement of theme in the extended noun phrase). The use of adverbial clauses signifies that a 'questioning mind' is at work, asking 'how', 'why', 'for what', 'when' and 'where' questions. The use of these grammatical features therefore correlates unsurprisingly with the teacher's judgements of 'bright' pupils. They are an indication of a culturally valued attitude, the linguistic markers of the 'ideal pedagogic subject' (Hasan 1988; Bourne 1992). However, the ideology of difference, the normative curve of achievement, requires that not all pupils are 'ideal', that levels are identified and maintained, otherwise social inequalities could not be so easily naturalised.

Pedagogy based in an assumption of natural development towards unexamined norms operates as a masked transmission of the culture, hiding differential access (Bernstein 1990) and normalising differential achievement by locating it within the child as innate 'ability'. Alongside this, developmental child language research operates with apparently neutral grammatical indicators, but in effect these selected indicators help to provide a normative system of regulation of achievement which naturalises cultural values. In this paper I hope to have illustrated the importance of not foreclosing investigation into differential levels of achievement through the use of dubious concepts such as 'ability' or 'maturity':

> Just like the game of chess, speech communication is a game played by two people whose respective moves always take place in response to those of a fellow player ... the purpose of the game is not, however, to checkmate the opponent. (Lehtonen – Sajavaara – May 1977).

In learning to write in the classroom, as in speech communication, there are usually at least two people present: the learner and the teacher. Examining the process of writing, and not just the final written text, the traces of that interaction become clear, and it becomes possible to learn not just how some children progress, but also how some children find themselves regularly in checkmate, and so choose not to go on playing.

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APPENDIX 1: THREE EXAMPLES OF CHILDREN'S WRITTEN TEXTS

TEXT 1 (TUK)

(First draft)

The flower smell like polo on the slamens. The petals on the flower smell like onion and the lea

(Second draft)

The flower smell like polo on the slamens and its feels ticklish and it looks like stars. The petals smell like onion and it feels silky and it looks like a oval shaped leaves. The calyx smell like onion too and it feels furry and it looks like a star. The stem feels furry too it

(Final draft)

What the Flower Smell like Feels like and what it looks like

The stamens smell like mint and it reminds me of when I am eating polo. The stamens feels like fur it reminds me of my teddy bear. The stamens look like stars it reminds me of the stars in the night time in the sky. The shape of the stamens look like the shape of the sun. The calyx smells like dry grass it reminds me of when I am in Hong kong. at the park. It feels furry and it reminds me of my hamster. It looks like a cabbage and it reminds me of when I am eating cabbage. The shape of the calyx looks like a star. The petals smell like mint too and the petals feels silky. It looks like flatened bananas. The stem smell like grass. it feels furry and it looks like a tree. The leaves on the stem smell like grass too. The leaves feels smoth and it looks like a green hand and my flower is yellow and the name of the flower is a single chrysanthemum. The stamens look like carrots.

TEXT 2 (NICOLA)

what the flower looks like

I drew a yellow flower. The stem looks like someone's body with no legs because its ate nothing for about 4 or 5 years or maybe more. If you feel your hand it is nt furry like the stem becaase the stem has got liffle bits of hair but your hand has nt. The stem looks like a bamboo stick.

petal The petals look like sweets in a corolla around the stamens what have been squashed flat. It looks like a little soft sweet which has grown a bit bigger as someones trod on it. When someone treads on a soft sweet it gets bigger. The sweet would have to be a banana sweet or a lemon sweet. because they are the colour yellow. The shape of the sweets would have to be this kind of shape.

TEXT 3 (SOMIRON)

my flower smells dirty. And in the stamens it has lot of star on the stamens and if you take all the stamens out of the stamens it has pattern on it horizontal and vertical line and it have spot at the stamens. *calyx* my calyx got same sort of leaf. it Looks like a leaf. but they call sepal.

stem. The stem have stripes on it and its long stem and it got long stripes if you touch the stem it is warm if you touch it.

my petal are soft and it got yellow colour on the petal.

APPENDIX 2: ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S TEXTS

Name	Total no. of words	Complex Noun Phrase in subject position	Variety of Adverbial clause types
Tuk	3056	14	22 x time 12 x reason 5 x condition 11 x purpose
Nicola	3021	7	12 x time 15 x reason 11 x condition 5 x result 6 x purpose 4 x place 1 x manner
Nhan	3624	12	6 x time 14 x reason 2 x condition 6 x purpose
Ahmed	4037	22	16 x time 18 x reason 7 x condition 7 x purpose 2 x manner
Ashique	1428	2	3 x time 4 x condition
Lukon	1213	0	0
Somiron	1461	3	4 x reason 3 x condition 3 x purpose
Wai Man	2125	7	3 x time 8 x reason 6 x condition