

Locating agency in the classroom: A metaphor analysis of teacher talk in a college developmental reading class

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This study employed a metaphor analysis approach to investigate instructor language as it relates to the positioning of agency within a college developmental reading course context. Agency, or the socioculturally mediated potential to act, is a crucial part of self-regulated, self-efficacious learning and contributes to identity formation and affirmation. Understanding where agency is being positioned via classroom discourse can have important implications for the teaching and learning transaction, including the construction of students' implicit theories about their literacy practices and their roles as active learners. As a type of discourse analysis, metaphor analysis allows for an unobtrusive, highly ecologically valid method of determining the underlying conceptualisations about a given topic that are held by participants in discourse communities. The article concludes with pedagogical implications.

Keywords: teacher conceptualisations; metaphor analysis; literacy; postsecondary literacy education

Introduction

In this article, we investigate instructor language use in a college developmental reading class as it relates to the positioning of agency – that is, where aspects of control are located – within the classroom context. We focus on the metaphorical language used by the instructor of the class and how that language can influence students' understanding of their role in the teaching and learning transaction, as well as their implicit theories of literacy practices. Specifically, we are looking at areas where the belief systems implicit in the instructor's language use run counter to the instructor's stated approach to literacy instruction. Through metaphor analysis we uncover the Discourse models (Gee 2005) implicitly in play in a college developmental reading class.

Developmental reading curricula have existed in various forms in higher education in the United States for over a century (Stahl and King 2009). Recent analysis of ACT college entrance test outcomes has indicated that fewer than half of incoming college students in the US were prepared for the reading requirements of a typical first-year college course (ACT 2013), making college developmental reading courses a core aspect of how colleges provide academic support to struggling

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students. Historically, students placed in these courses are among the most precariously positioned students in higher education. Recent work with developmental college students (Armstrong 2007) has demonstrated that self-perceived lack of control and agency, manifested in learners' metaphorical language, can have a negative impact on writing development when students view texts as beyond their abilities to shape and control.

Understanding the belief systems – also termed conceptualisations, in metaphor analysis literature – that students hold is key to understanding how students approach literacy and learning in general. For example, Simpson and Nist's (2002) research found that successful students believed they were responsible for their own learning, while less successful students believed the professor was in control of their learning. And in general, students' belief systems about literacy affect the strategies they use while reading and writing, as well as how they approach a text and what they expect to get out of a text (Goodman and Marek 1996; Schraw and Bruning 1996, 1999). These beliefs about literacy are also affected by the instruction they receive and – importantly – by the language used during that instruction (Johnston 2004; Zeidler and Lederman 1989). Because of the influence that instruction and instructor language has on the development of student belief systems, and therefore on student learning, examining instructor language is vital. Inquiry into this area is particularly critical when we consider that instructors may not be aware that the language they are using could be building belief systems that run counter to the perspectives they are attempting to instil in their lessons. Belief systems are not normally transparent. Because they are deeply ingrained through experience and culture, such intrinsic conceptualisations may be difficult for participants to directly articulate and for researchers to accurately interpret. For that reason, metaphor analysis was used in this study as the research tool to determine student and instructor conceptualisations.

In this article, we investigate belief systems in the classroom context through instructor language use, especially as that language relates to the positioning of agency within the classroom context. That is, we focus our analysis on where the instructor locates control within the classroom, as revealed by metaphorical language produced during class sessions.

The study is based on three interrelated premises. The first is that agency – defined here as 'the socioculturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn 2001, 112) – is central to students' identity and control of their own learning processes, especially in terms of its relationship with self-regulated learning (Bandura 2001). The second is that students' beliefs about how learning happens, and their conceptualisation of their own role in the learning process, is a crucial part of mastering both the ideological and technical aspects of the college classroom. The third premise is that instructors play a role in the shaping of students' conceptualisations in a variety of ways, including through their classroom discourse, or their 'teacher-talk'. These premises are briefly described below.

Premises

The first premise, agency, has often been viewed in dualistic terms in direct opposition to macro social structure (Campbell 2009). However, the perspective adopted in this article is one of agency being intrinsically social (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) and functioning interdependently with social structure (Bandura

2008). Agentic properties necessarily operate within larger socio-cultural, structural constraints and, importantly, agency is reliant upon available tools, as the Vygotskian understanding of agency as ‘the individual(s)-operating-with-mediational-means’ (Wertsch, Tulviste, and Hagstrom 1993, 346) makes clear. Bandura noted that agency involves ‘the deliberative ability to make choices and action plans [and] the ability to give shape to appropriate courses of action and to motivate and regulate their execution’ (Bandura 2001, 8). In the academic arena, agency is critical in initiating and directing self-regulated learning (McCombs and Marzano 1990), and self-regulated learning is a key contributor to academic success (Bandura 1986; Ley and Young 1998). In short, this premise asserts that where agency is assumed to be located in a classroom can have implications for learning.

The second premise involves students’ belief systems as related to aspects of academic success (Bandura 1997; Vacca 2006). Specific to literacy practices, research on writing has made the link between student conceptualisations and writing proficiency (White and Bruning 2005), and there is evidence that students’ conceptualisations about themselves as readers play a role in overall reading proficiency (Conlon, Zimmer-Gembeck, Creed, and Tucker 2006; Goodman and Marek 1996), including aspects as specific as strategy choice and usage (Nist and Simpson 2000; Schraw and Bruning 1996, 1999).

The third premise involves the derivation of students’ conceptualisations. These conceptualisations are not intrinsic to any specific individual or group or emergent through pre-determined stages, nor are they created in a vacuum. Instead, students’ conceptualisations are formed through the social interactions and specific experiences they have inside and outside of school contexts, and one of those influences is the language used by the instructor (see Barnes 1971; Johnston 2004; Moje 1995; Zeidler and Lederman 1989). As Johnston (2004) notes, ‘... the language that teachers (and their students) use in classrooms is a big deal’ (10) and conveys, among other things, ‘noticing, identity, agency, and epistemology’ (77).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to better understand how instructor language positions agency within a developmental reading course context. Building on an emerging research approach undertaken in previous studies (Armstrong 2007; Cortazzi and Jin 1999; de Guerrero and Villamil 2002) that centres on the analysis of spontaneous, often non-deliberate, metaphors, study data were collected in a highly ecologically valid context – entire class sessions were video and audio taped – to investigate how language and texts were conceptualised within that classroom setting. Because implicit theories of language and literacy are embedded in such conceptualisations, revealing their connections through metaphor analysis is an important part of understanding the theories at work in a postsecondary reading instruction context. The overriding research question that guided this analysis was: *In this college developmental reading class context, where does the instructor’s metaphorical language position agency within the classroom?*

Following a description of the theoretical and methodological frameworks through which the data were analysed, this article centres on a discussion of two competing conceptual metaphors uncovered in the instructor’s language: TEXT AS TOOL and TEXT AS AGENT. Using instructor interview data to triangulate the findings, implications for classroom practice are addressed, specifically with regard to how

teacher-talk frames the teaching and learning transaction and how assignments of agency can influence an instructor's implementation of Discourse models (Gee 2005).

Viewed from a pedagogical perspective, these data represent a snapshot of how the instructor used language as a vehicle for accomplishing course goals. The capture and analysis of metaphorical expressions provides both practitioners and researchers with additional insight about the enactment of intended curriculum and the consequent effects for students that would be otherwise unavailable using traditional classroom observation methods.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework through which this project is viewed is twofold. First, it relies on the methodological approach of collecting and analysing spoken metaphors as described by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Kovecses (2002), a cognitive–linguistic perspective that problematises views of metaphors as simply linguistic phenomena or rhetorical flourish, viewing them instead as indicators of deeply held conceptualisations. As de Guerrero and Villamil (2002, 96) noted, metaphors are 'socially grounded cognitive tools'.

Second, Gee's (2005) approach to discourse analysis serves as the theoretical frame within which the collected metaphors are understood. This approach provides a sociocultural view of the conceptualisations signalled by the participants' spoken metaphors, which in turn offers insight into cultural Discourse models. The capital 'D' in Gee's construct of Discourse is deliberate. Where discourse (not capitalised) refers to syntax, written and oral speech acts and other aspects of language production, Discourse (capitalised) goes further to include not just syntactic and semantic rules, but also contextualised usage – everything about language that marks how it is used by members of different groups. Gee's construct thus reminds us that how, when and where language is used alters its meaning and effects.

Specific to this study, this approach allows an analysis of participant metaphors to inform their implicit and explicit conceptualisations of literacy practices, which are formed through a variety of social networks, are culturally bound and are responsive to specific situational contexts. Researchers use a process of metaphor analysis to uncover learners' belief systems based on the theoretical perspective that conceptualisations, actions and language are 'metaphorically structured' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 5); that is, that there is a link between what is said or done and what is thought. Investigating participants' metaphorical language thus involves close examination of the source and target domains of that metaphor, analysed in order to gain insight into participants' perspectives, views and understandings about a given topic. In order to better understand how the instructor's spoken use of metaphorical expressions can be viewed as responsive to the specific situational contexts Gee's (2005) theoretical frame suggests, analyses and interpretations were triangulated with the instructor's input during the final phase of this project.

Methods

Metaphor analysis is an investigational and analytical approach that collects and examines *metaphorical linguistic expressions*, the actual spoken metaphors articulated by participants, in order to identify *conceptual metaphors*, or the underlying analogical conceptualisations, that can provide insight into participants'

perspectives and understandings of a given topic (see Armstrong, Davis, and Paulson 2011; de Guerrero and Villamil 2002; Kovecses 2002; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). A metaphorical linguistic expression is an utterance by a participant that uses analogy to convey understandings, as opposed to direct, literal description. For example, if a student says ‘reading is something I don’t enjoy’, that is not a metaphorical linguistic expression, as it is a straightforward literal description. However, if the student says instead ‘reading is like having a hammer hit me in the head over and over’, that is a metaphorical linguistic expression (Paulson and Armstrong 2011, 497). Metaphor analysis procedures (Armstrong 2007; Kovecses 2002) allow literacy researchers to go beyond the surface of spoken language and interview responses to understand how participants conceptualise literacy practices in specific contexts.

Although procedures vary across projects, Armstrong, Davis, and Paulson (2011, 160) reported the following steps commonly used in metaphor analysis studies:

- (1) Gather metaphorical linguistic expressions from participants
- (2) Identify source and target domains of the metaphor
- (3) Identify source features of the metaphor
- (4) Map source features onto target
- (5) Develop conceptual metaphors based on the resulting mappings
- (6) Identify entailments of the conceptual metaphor source
- (7) Identify hidden features of the conceptual metaphor source
- (8) Identify themes in patterns of conceptual metaphors

In this study, spoken metaphor data were collected through an approach consistent with classroom ethnography (see Purcell-Gates 2004), in which three 75-min class sessions from a college developmental reading class were audio and video recorded using multiple audio and video recorders placed at different areas throughout the classroom. Individual class meetings during Weeks 1, 4 and 7 were selected as representative sessions to provide insight on the scope and trajectory of the classroom conversations as well as the construction of key concepts as they were developing throughout the 10-week academic term. The data of interest here centre on the instructor’s metaphorical language used when discussing language and/or texts.

The metaphorical linguistic expressions found in the data sets were analysed for the relationship between the *source domain*, defined as the conceptual domain from which a person constructs metaphorical expressions, and the *target domain*, defined as the conceptual domain that the person is trying to understand, in order to map analogical correspondences. *Metaphorical entailments*, which carry aspects of the source domain to the target domain by logical means, were also analysed and included in the mapping process. The conceptual metaphors resulting from this analysis were then categorised according to the themes in the patterns that emerged.

Thematic triangulation (Armstrong, Davis, and Paulson 2011, 156), where data sources are revisited during the mapping process to confirm or disconfirm source and target domains, track frequency, and check initial researcher interpretations of conceptual metaphors and themes, was used as a verification method. In addition, a process of metaphor checking (Armstrong, Davis, and Paulson 2011) was also used for verification purposes. Similar to member checking in qualitative analysis (Lincoln and Guba 1985), metaphor checking involves the researcher and participant discussing the participant’s metaphorical linguistic expressions to ensure that the researcher’s interpretations are aligned with the participant’s intended meanings. In

this project, once data were collected and preliminary analyses were complete, analyses and interpretations were checked with the instructor of the class in order to provide interpretive information about the metaphorical linguistic expressions being analysed. This process contributed to a high level of confidence in interpretations of metaphorical language in this study.

As noted previously, the general goal of metaphor analysis is to understand participants' conceptual metaphors through close analysis of the metaphorical linguistic expressions with which they are inextricably linked. In this study, those conceptual metaphors were viewed through Gee's (2005) theory of Discourse models. Closely related to cultural models (see Gee 2000; Holland and Quinn 1987), Discourse models are 'the largely unconscious theories we hold that help us make sense of texts and the world' (Gee 2005, 71). Viewed through this theory, metaphors are indicators of larger Discourse models, similar to the ways in which Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Kovecses (2002) traditionally view metaphors as indicators of conceptualisations. While the social and cultural foundations of metaphorical conceptualisations are often implied in cognitive-linguistic theory, Gee's theory is much more explicit on this point. Gee notes that 'metaphors are connected to "master models" in the sense that the tacit theories they imply are used widely to organise a number of significant domains for a given culture or social group' (2005, 83-4).

In terms of this study, collecting and analysing the metaphorical linguistic expressions produced allowed a better understanding of how language and texts were conceptualised within the institutional context of a college developmental reading class and in conjunction with the tacit theories about literacy that influence instructional practices.

Participants

The context within which this study took place was a college developmental reading class in a large Midwestern college in the United States, with 14 first-year college students (eight males and six females) enrolled. Aggregate demographic data relative to the students in this class showed an average age of 18.7 years, an average ACT (a widely used college readiness assessment) score of 17.3 and an average high school grade point average of 2.61/4.00. Additionally, the student participants scored an average of 48.5 (out of a possible 70) on the Degrees of Reading Power placement test used in the college.

The focus of this analysis centres on the language use of the class instructor. The instructor who participated in this study was a highly experienced teacher who had taught high school English for 10 years prior to receiving her doctorate in English, and spent another 10 years teaching undergraduate and graduate English courses, as well as developmental college reading and writing courses, at three colleges in the Midwest. At the time of this study, the instructor was also teaching an online graduate-level, postsecondary teacher preparation course in the college's School of Education.

Data sources

The data for this project were instructor discourse in a college developmental reading course, captured in an ecologically valid manner. Three 75-min class sessions were recorded in their entirety with multiple audio and video recorders to capture all of the discourse that took place. Of specific interest is the metaphorical

language used to refer to, describe or contextualise language and/or texts. Interviews with the instructor were used for data triangulation purposes. In addition, as a follow-up to initial analysis of the data, the instructor provided written responses to interview questions focused on the emerging findings of the study. As noted previously, all analyses were discussed with the instructor of the class as part of an ongoing verification process for metaphor interpretations; the second author of this article was the class instructor.

Class context

The theme of this college developmental reading course was titled ‘Exploring the Ways Words Matter’ and was intended to encourage a constructivist perspective on the uses of language and the exploration of textual meanings and their effects. College-level literacy instruction based on a social constructivist approach aims to support students’ emerging sense of agency by promoting awareness of the effects language has beyond the printed page or spoken exchange, as well as by developing students’ facility with using their own language in purposeful ways. Further to the intended pedagogical goals for this developmental reading class, the course readings selected by the instructor aimed similarly to advance this social constructivist perspective on the contextualised nature of text production and reception.

The three recorded class meetings followed a pattern commonly found in college developmental reading and writing classrooms. Typically, the instructor began by introducing key concepts to provide a framework for the class conversations, and then moved to small-group work and activities focused on the text under discussion to promote interaction and meaning-making between peers. After that, the instructor returned to a whole-class discussion format where students could share their findings and interpretations and she could check for student learning. Employing this kind of scaffolded instructional approach served to involve students in the classroom activities and discussions.

Results

The focal question of this study was: *In this developmental college reading class context, where does the instructor’s metaphorical language position agency within the classroom?* A variety of metaphorical language used by both the instructor and the students was collected during the study period. Analysis of the metaphorical linguistic expressions that were found resulted in the categorisation of conceptual metaphors that included: TEXT AS AGENT; TEXT AS TOOL; LANGUAGE AS AGENT; TEXT AS SPEECH; READING AS UNDERSTANDING; KNOWLEDGE AS CONSTRUCTED; LANGUAGE AS TOOL; and KNOWLEDGE AS COMMODITY (in metaphor analysis literature, conceptual metaphors are traditionally depicted in SMALL CAPS). Such variety within educational venues has been documented by previous metaphor analysis research (Cortazzi and Jin 1999; de Guerrero and Villamil 2002) and specifically in college developmental reading and writing contexts (Armstrong 2007; Paulson and Armstrong 2011). The current study, however, is not focused on variety, but rather on salient and potentially important elements of the conceptualisations of ‘text’ and ‘language’ found in the collected data. Further to that purpose, during analysis of data the issue of agency emerged, and data that informed understanding of agency as related to language and text were particularly prominent. Those data are focused on here, specifically in terms of what

some of the metaphorical language used implies about the location of agency in this classroom context, where ‘agency’ involves intentionality and control, among other aspects (Bandura 2001, 2008).

The sections below illustrate the study’s indication that the metaphorical data uncovered competing conceptualisations of language and text occurring in the instructor’s classroom language. This finding is significant with regard to the research question guiding this study: namely, where an instructor’s metaphorical language positions agency in the classroom. At issue is how two competing conceptual metaphors appearing in the data – TEXT AS TOOL and TEXT AS AGENT – position agency either toward or away from students within the context of this college developmental reading course, and how competing assignments of agency matter to the instructor’s ‘on-the-ground’ implementation of Discourse models as these are realised in the classroom.

Class session context

Metaphor data are presented here through a description of one of the class sessions that illustrates how instructor language was situated and contextualised. This whole-class discussion took place on the first day of data collection in Week 1 (the second class meeting) and was designed to generate ideas about language and text – specifically, ‘words’ – in order to set the stage for process and concept discussions about these terms and their centrality to the course content and theme, ‘Exploring the Ways Words Matter’.

Language as a mediational tool: Text as tool

To encourage student-to-student peer interaction, the discussion was preceded by small-group work. After splitting the class into groups, the instructor described their assignment:

Together in your groups, try to create a list of five, alright, at least five, specific examples, right – the goal here is to try to make this ‘exploring the ways words matter’ theme less abstract. We’re going to try to connect it to specific examples in our lives. Five times, specific times, when what you said, what you read, or what you wrote, had an actual effect on a situation or a relationship or what you thought or what somebody else thought.

Note that this lead-in description to the group work discussion employed the word ‘you’ in conjunction with ‘said/read/wrote’ as part of what caused the effect. That is, the instructor’s preparatory remarks about the framework for the class discussion seemed to encourage conceptualisations of texts or words as objects – tools – that people use to effect change, and thus also appeared to promote conceptualisations of language as a mediational tool between speakers or between readers and writers.

After 10 minutes of group brainstorming, the instructor asked for examples from each group and recorded these on the white board. Students volunteered a variety of examples, ranging from the effects their writing/speaking has had on other people to the effects their reading has had on their own standpoints and worldviews. For example, one student described how telling his mother that he loved her affected their relationship, while another provided an example of how a text message she

sent to a friend enabled a conversation between them despite the fact that they had been arguing the day before. Still another student described her experience of reading articles about a controversial event involving a sports celebrity to explain how it was only when she read the account in a reputable newspaper that she believed the story was actually true. One other student described his memory of reading William Cullen Bryant's 'Thanatopsis' in high school, a poem that he argued 'makes you have a completely different [out]look on life'.

Drawing this part of the discussion to a close, the instructor commented:

So we *do* that with our language.

She then provided an example of the multiple uses of language in this way:

You can either use language to connect with other people who have similar experiences ... or you can use it to separate people, right? Call somebody out. We can either hide or we can illuminate facts in some sense, and hopefully, illuminate the truth too. When you make an apology, you're hoping to fix a problem, but there's always the other side of it ... you can create a problem with words, through words. There's always that sort of push/pull relationship ... this dual nature of words.

The instructor also used this beginning discussion to foreground and frame the kind of texts the students would be reading throughout the course and the kinds of questions they would be asking in the process:

What difference has [the authors'] writing made in their own lives and ... what difference do they expect that their writing will have in the lives of other people who read their words?

Each of these excerpts shows the instructor positioning language as a mediational tool to be employed by students, by readers and writers, and by humans in general. Highlighting the centrality of the language users' role in effecting change through written or spoken texts – 'So we *do* that with our language' – encouraged students to conceptualise words as tools that can be used to achieve purposeful communicative ends.

Language and texts as agents

The conceptualisation of language as a mediational tool, however, was not the only conceptualisation in play. The other most common metaphorical references to texts, words and language made by the instructor involved metaphorical representations of personification, with language and texts as subjects – agents – acting of their own accord. These representations are known as ontological metaphors, a common type of metaphor in which inanimate objects are provided human characteristics. In short, concepts of text and language were positioned by the instructor's ontological metaphorical language as holding agentic properties, with the ability to act and cause things to happen.

The ontological metaphors the instructor used differ from the TEXT AS TOOL conceptual metaphor first employed by the instructor, in that they worked to position text/language as agentic instead of assigning agency to the language user. This distinction is especially important when considering the Vygotskian view of

agency as ‘individual(s)-operating-with-mediational-means’ (Wertsch, Tulviste, and Hagstrom 1993, 346). Language was Vygotsky’s primary focus in terms of mediational tools (Wertsch and Rupert 1993) and, as viewed through this Vygotskian perspective, language is the tool through which students mediate agency. Whereas the examples in the TEXT AS TOOL section above support that construction of human agency, the instructor’s use of the alternate and competing metaphor of TEXT AS AGENT, as illustrated in the sections below, do not.

Language as imbued with power: Text as agent

Moving to the next phase of the whole-class discussion during the first day of data collection, the instructor asked: ‘If these are the kinds of examples we can come up with or think about, can we draw some larger conclusions?’ She then extrapolated from the students’ examples to form four broad claims about how words matter, and listed those on the white board. She prefaced the list with a verbal ‘Words can ...’ and wrote:

- (1) Fix a problem/misunderstanding or create a problem
- (2) Improve or destroy a relationship
- (3) Hide or illuminate facts, the truth
- (4) Connect or separate people

These generalised statements did not proceed directly from the examples, although there are obvious connections, as the cases cited in the preceding section demonstrate. On the white board, the instructor circled *fix*, *create*, *improve*, *destroy*, *hide*, *illuminate*, *connect* and *separate* and asked the class what part of speech they were. Once students responded with ‘verbs,’ she stated:

They’re all verbs, right. Which is one of the ways that words matter, that they aren’t just things that we say or we read or we write, but they *do* things. Does that make sense? There’s an *action*. ... Words do things in the world. Language is powerful in that sense.

Absent the context described here, one explanation for the instructor’s use of ‘words’ as the subject that employs an action verb – the agent – might be that the thread of the class discussion directed the end result of the claims written on the white board. In that case, the instructor would be reflecting and recording the flavour of the whole class discussion. But taken as a whole, the class discussion did not seem to begin with a bias toward ‘words’ being the agent; nor did the students’ examples seem to be directed away from their own agency and toward that of ‘words’. That the instructor summed up the discussion with a series of claims that metaphorically ascribed agency to ‘words’ evidences a noticeable shift in the conceptual framework with regard to the positioning of agency in the classroom: agency is directed away from students and toward texts and language instead. Regarding metaphorical linguistic expressions involving ontological or otherwise metaphorical usage of ‘text’, the instructor’s language use positioned ‘text’ – either generally conceived or specifically related to the course text – as the actor/subject in control of readers and able to act. The following examples illustrate that usage.

Poem as agent

In response to a student's description of his attempts to use a poem he wrote to reestablish his relationship with his significant other, the instructor said:

So the poem brought two people together, right?

In her brief summary of the outcome of the student's attempt to reconnect with his significant other, the instructor's language positioned the text/poem as acting as the agent that brought about change, as opposed to positing language as a mediational tool being used by the student/author to bring about the change.

Book as agent

Similarly, when another student described the effect reading a religious book had for his understanding of abstract concepts such as moral standards and living an 'upright' life, the instructor summed up his experience in this way:

So this book helped you to, sort of, find your stance ... information that helped shape your understanding, or shape your worldview.

Here again, the use of ontological metaphors in the instructor's language to characterise the book's power to shape the student's perspectives on the world, as well as to find his stance, positioned agency away from the student and reassigned it instead to the book itself, which in turn became the subject capable of enacting change.

Essay as agent

In the following excerpt, the instructor was clearly aiming to support the students' abilities as effective readers when she said:

This was a long essay, right? Um, did you all make it through the essay because you are strong and stronger than the essay?

The mode this supportive comment takes was to pit the students' superior reading strengths against a personification of the essay/text as an entity that has similar human attributes. If an essay is strong, then it can overpower and control weaker students; this also set up a metaphorical context of student vs. essay. While this comment did not deny agency to students explicitly, it nevertheless provided agency to the essay.

Syllabus as agent

A final example is given in the context of explanation of an assignment in the course syllabus:

In this box at the bottom of the page [of the syllabus] is the actual writing assignment that you have in here. Okay, so Reading Assignment #1, it's really a writing assignment, umm, and it's asking these questions.

Here, the instructor positioned the assignment itself, via the syllabus, as asking questions of the students. While the instructor wrote the assignment for the syllabus, the first-person agentic ‘I’ is not used here, in favour of ascribing control to the syllabus assignment itself. This is not an uncommon method of shifting the responsibility for a difficult assignment off of the instructor and onto something else, and may have been a technique for building a notion of students-and-instructor teamwork in the class. However, as part of the larger pattern of metaphorical discourse in these class sessions, agency in this example is similarly ascribed away from humans and on to texts and language.

In contrast to the examples of the instructor’s discourse above, a non-agentic use of text/language in a similar mode would involve the verbs – fix, hide, connect, and so on – proceeding from a student in the class, not from abstract words or concrete textual objects like poems, books, essays or syllabi. That is, another way to understand the role of text/language is to understand the fixing, creating or destroying of concepts the instructor identified as stemming from a student’s *use* of language as a mediational tool to do something, where texts/language are not personified as having abilities and the capacity to act. While the instructor’s classroom language did not foreground conceptualisations of students’ use of text as a tool in these examples, her responses to interview questions positioned agency differently. Those responses are presented below.

Instructor interview

After data collection was complete, but at a point in time in which preliminary data analysis began to demonstrate the instructor’s classroom discourse focus on agentic properties of ‘text’ and ‘language’, a written interview was constructed that focused on her conceptualisations of those concepts. The interview was designed to allow the instructor to provide deliberate explanations and descriptions of these concepts.

In response to the first question, ‘What is agency?’ the instructor wrote:

Claiming agency is tantamount to claiming the capacity to act, the capacity *to do* something or to effect some intended result (instructor’s emphasis).

In her extended discussion surrounding this response, the instructor was careful to distinguish between conceiving agency as the ‘capacity’ to act and conceiving agency as the ‘power’ to act. Whereas capacity, she explained, ‘stresses the always available *potential* for action’ and promotes a contextualised view of agency as ‘enacted strategically by someone for specific purposes’, power, she argued, ‘tends to commodify and abstract agency’ and so advances the mistaken view that ‘some people have it and some people don’t’ (emphasis in original). Situating her definition of agency within the broader conceptual framework of capacity led the instructor to conclude that ‘the end of any discussion of what agency is or can be needs to include the agent – the actual person or persons involved in the “doing,” the “acting,” and/or the “effecting” of some intended result’.

In response to a series of questions focused on the nature of agency in a college developmental reading classroom, and where that agency is located, she wrote:

Regarding ‘who’ has agency in the classroom, i.e., within the literate exchanges that occur in any given classroom, I’d say agency is enacted at various points in time by all involved in the exchanges. Agency, in this sense, shifts from speaker to speaker.

Reasserting her view that agency is a ‘*human* capacity for action’ (instructor’s own emphasis) and therefore ‘necessarily available to all,’ the instructor went on to describe her conceptualisation of agency as aligned with her pedagogy, specifically Freire’s ([1970] 1993) model of student-centred teaching that calls for redistributing the authority for knowing across the classroom. Positing that Freirean pedagogy is a means of ‘helping students understand the myriad ways in which we are all staked in the learning/teaching transaction’, she asserted that this ‘same pedagogical move’ can likewise assist students in claiming their ‘capacity for acting, for doing (i.e., agency)’. Relative to how agency is variously enacted in the classroom, the instructor noted that ‘our uses [*sic*] of language is, again, one way we can “claim” that potential for agency, for (our) knowing’.

In response to the final interview question, ‘If you had a few minutes to talk to students in your class about agency, what would you tell them?’, the instructor re-emphasised the relationship she sees between acts of literacy and acts of agency, writing:

Claiming our ways of using language is a means of recognising ourselves as ‘agents’ in the world.

Further situating this view within the context of a college developmental reading course, she added:

Discovering the connections between our ways of using language and our ways of making sense of (and generally getting about in) the world is, in large measure, the ‘work’ of this classroom.

The instructor’s comments above illustrate her belief that supporting students’ burgeoning identification of themselves as agents is central to her role as a college reading teacher. That is, one of the pedagogical goals of her classroom is to scaffold students’ effective use of language and text as tools.

Responses to the survey questions indicate that the instructor clearly views agency as located in the students in her class and not in inanimate objects, and that she considers agency a key aspect of becoming more proficient users of texts and language. This is in contrast to the metaphorical language used in the classroom which imbued language and text itself with agentic properties. This discrepancy, and the importance of teacher-talk in the classroom, is addressed in the Discussion section of this article.

Overview of findings

Analysis of the instructor’s metaphorical language in this study revealed two competing conceptual frames: TEXT AS TOOL and TEXT AS AGENT. Whereas the TEXT AS TOOL conceptual metaphor facilitated a view of language as a mediational tool and located agency in the language user – that is, texts are objects people do things to or with (e.g., construct, interpret, analyse, critique, etc.) – the TEXT AS AGENT conceptual metaphor facilitated a view of language as imbued with agentic properties of its own

accord, where words have control over meaning and can themselves effect change. Again, these data are not presented as proof of the instructor's conceptualisations, but rather as the result of a focused analysis of where agency was positioned through her metaphorical references to text and language.

Of particular interest in this project is the TEXT AS AGENT conceptual metaphor, as it highlights a specific type of metaphorical usage prevalent in our everyday speech: personification. Personification is an ontological metaphor in which human attributes are given to an object (Kovecses 2002; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). While many metaphorical linguistic expressions are expressed in A:B structure either explicitly ('love is a battlefield') or implicitly ('she derailed his argument'), other metaphors are more subtle. One class of metaphors that does not explicitly adhere to A:B structure is that of ontological metaphors, which assign more or less concrete properties to more or less abstract ideas. That this type of metaphor surfaced repeatedly is a distinguishing feature of this study.

Discussion

It is important to begin this discussion with a reminder that the focus here is on the communication of two specific elements of a college developmental reading class: conceptualisations of text and conceptualisations of language. The data presented above provide evidence that the instructor used ontological language assigning agentic properties to text and language in addition to assigning that agency to the students. However, this key finding should not imply that these were the only metaphors being used. For example, the instructor also conceptualised TEXT AS A CONTAINER, WRITING AS SPEAKING, READING AS UNDERSTANDING and KNOWLEDGE AS CONSTRUCTION. Rather than a focus on making claims about the instructor's overall conceptualisations of some important aspects of the course, this report is focused on two competing conceptualisations of text – TEXT AS TOOL and TEXT AS AGENT – and their accompanying messages about the meaning, uses and effects of language.

The question that guided the inquiry presented here was: *In this developmental college reading class context, where does the instructor's metaphorical language position agency within the classroom?* This question has important pedagogical implications. First, language used during instruction can implicitly and explicitly affect students' own emerging belief systems and approaches to the process being taught: in this case, writing and reading processes in the college context. Second, although language is powerful, it can also be subtle in ways that do not immediately become apparent even to the user of that language. Instructors may not be aware that they implicitly frame aspects of their instruction in ways that can run counter to their more explicit directives in the class. The following discussion expands on both of those points as they relate to the guiding question of this study.

Teacher-talk is important

From a macro perspective, Fennimore (2000, 4) notes that educators' 'descriptive language *actually shapes the school experiences and educational outcomes of students*' (emphasis in original). At a classroom level, the language a teacher uses is similarly powerful for students, especially where it shapes the nature of the concepts being discussed (see Barnes 1971; Johnston 2004; Moje 1995). In science

classrooms, for example, Zeidler and Lederman (1989) found that the ordinary language used by teachers revealed implicit conceptualisations of the nature of the subject matter that was conveyed to their students. At the foundation of such phenomena is the way in which language is not only representational but also constitutive (Johnston 2004). While language represents or reflects perceptions of social reality, it also contributes to the construction of that reality through its ability to structure, at the conceptual level, the way people think and talk about a particular idea or theoretical construct. In other words, the language used in the classroom is not simply a delivery method for information about science concepts or literacy processes, but is itself an essential factor in the construction of the reality of those concepts for students. This construction of reality is not necessarily done in overt and obvious ways; in fact, much of what contributes to personal Discourse models may be gradual and implicit, as opposed to acute and explicit.

One reason why the data presented here are compelling involves the contrast between the language the instructor used in the classroom, in which agentic properties are assigned to language and texts, and the instructor's deliberate, stated views on this topic through the written interview, in which she describes agency as belonging to people, with students as controlling their uses of language and their actions with words and texts. In post-analysis discussions with the instructor about where agency is located in her classroom, she expressed surprise that her frequent use of ontological metaphors positioned students in a way that was not only at odds with the conceptualisation of language as a mediational tool, but also with what she understood her own instruction to be accomplishing: increasing student awareness of the effects of language use beyond the written page or spoken exchange as a means of encouraging them to claim their agency as college-level readers and writers. To be clear, this should not be construed as a complaint against the instructor; rather, it provides useful information for understanding how the instructor's key message of readers and writers as agents of their literacy was being undermined by her metaphorical language use, which instead imbued inanimate objects and abstract concepts with agentic power. At its core, this discrepancy is evidence of the ways in which an instructor's implementation of Discourse models may be realised in the classroom.

Discourse models

Of the three basic types of Discourse models that Gee (2005) identifies, two are of use in understanding the contrast between the instructor's in-class language and her written interview responses about the concept of agency. These are the espoused models and the models-in-(inter)action. An *espoused model* is the Discourse model that is consciously articulated and deliberately stated. A *model-in-(inter)action* is a model that 'consciously or unconsciously guide[s] our actual actions and interactions in the world' (Gee 2005, 83). The instructor's responses to the interview questions about agency are clearly driven by her espoused model, and the responses demonstrated internal consistency as well as coherence with the instructor's stated class goals and educational philosophy in general. However, the spontaneous metaphorical language the instructor used in class may be evidence of a more implicit model-in-(inter)action of how to best structure concepts and language for students' acquisition of effective literacy practices. While the instructor's manifestation of each model – espoused and in-(inter)action – demonstrated internal

consistency within their respective contexts, there is an inconsistency evident when they are compared side-by-side.

Pedagogically, coherence between the espoused model and the model-in-(inter)action is important for basic reasons of consistency of classroom approach, curricula, evaluation and overall message. Specific to the type of inconsistency highlighted in this study, the importance of coherence between the instructor's two models also lies in the nature of classroom language as shaping those broader worldviews and outlooks through which students experience the learning process more generally. In other words, metaphors help define – or redefine – reality by directing our experience of, and participation in, everyday situations and events. How students experience the teaching and learning transaction, in terms of whether they actively approach texts and language as mediational tools or instead view texts and language as the agentic entities in the classroom, is connected to the messages implied by the particular conceptual metaphor in use. Such experiences matter to the students' development of their own implicit theories about literacy, its meaning and its uses, and can in this way influence who they understand themselves to be and, just as importantly, what they understand themselves to be able to do as college-level readers and writers.

Notes on language used in this article

Readers are routinely positioned by varying combinations of the authors, users, promoters, teachers, explicators – and others – of texts, for various purposes and in various degrees of deliberateness. Often this is described as texts 'positioning' readers, and – personification aside – the purpose of this article is not to counter that premise. Rather, what is noted here is that from a pedagogical perspective, building students' understanding of their agency in the classroom is commensurable with the vast amount of information we have about the power of self-regulatory, motivational and metacognitive aspects of student control over their own learning (Armstrong 2007; Bandura 2008; Simpson and Nist 2002). Further, and despite the conscious reflection on language and ontological personification of objects in this study, the article includes language that personifies non-human objects. The large number of abstracts published each year that begin 'This article argues that...' is evidence of how difficult it is to deliberately break away from such constructions in the writing of research reports, as well as of the pervasiveness of ontological metaphors occurring in human speech and communication. Such constructions can be useful, especially where they simplify awkward syntax or encourage conceptual overlaps that widen and enrich linguistic expression. The purpose of this article is likewise not to argue that such constructions or certain kinds of metaphors are 'wrong'. Instead, the focus here is on the pedagogical uses of the assignation of agency, in the classroom, with students, and what that might mean in terms of the students' understanding of their roles as learners – active or passive, for example – vis-à-vis texts and language use in class, and in terms of an instructor's ability to more consistently implement espoused Discourse models in these instructional contexts.

Conclusion

The data analysed in this study revealed two competing conceptual metaphors alternating in the instructor's classroom language: *TEXT AS TOOL*, which promotes a view of language as mediational tool and assigns agency to the student as the language user, and *TEXT AS AGENT*, which fosters a view of language as imbued with agentic properties of its own accord. Depending on which conceptual metaphor is in use, perspectives on the meaning, uses and effects of language, as well as the relationship between readers and writers and/or people and texts, noticeably shift. Two claims about the pedagogical implications suggested by the study findings can be made.

The first claim is that the conceptual metaphors instructors use in their classroom can frame instruction differently, shaping both the nature of the concepts being discussed and the message being delivered in various – and sometimes unintended – ways. As reported in this study, metaphor analysis can reveal discrepancies between instructors' espoused Discourse models and implicit models-in-(inter)action and, in turn, can enable them to better align intended curricular goals and the construction of key course concepts with 'on the ground' classroom instruction. In addition to raising instructor awareness of the integral role teacher-talk plays in directing meaning-making in the classroom, students also benefit from instruction that can establish surer links between course goals, instructional approaches, and the ongoing formation of their conceptual knowledge and understandings.

The second claim is that the conceptual metaphors instructors use in their classroom language shape students' experience of their learning differently and, as a result, can influence developing perceptions of themselves as agents of their literacy and as active participants in the educational process. How language and texts are conceptualised – either as mediational tools used by people to effect change or as the controlling entities in the classroom – alternately shifts the location of agency either toward or away from students and, in so doing, contributes to the construction of students' implicit theories of their own literacy practices as well.

Conceptualisations of agency in the classroom are important, and even more so when we understand that identity formation is 'an important aspect of human agency' (Bandura 2008, 22). In their connection to both the formation of students' school-affiliated identities and the ongoing development of their sense of self-efficacy as college learners, messages about agency communicated via metaphorical language in the classroom warrant examination. Metaphor analysis provides researchers and practitioners with a critical tool to discover how language 'works' in the classroom, a means of both improving our pedagogy and, in turn, empowering our students.

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