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Developing citizenship through competence in speech at age 11

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This paper reports on the results of a study which is part of the Swedish National Agency for Education's evaluation of speech. There is a short background and presentation of aims and methods, then the conclusions are discussed theoretically.

Background and aims

An important reason why children need to develop competence in speech is that the ability to speak and to be listened to is decisive in gaining influence in a democratic society. Not everyone uses speech as a function in their daily work, but all citizens of a living democracy need to be able to express themselves in speech. This skill is as necessary in gaining influence as a parent in your child's school as it is in official political decision making. It is well known that most people remain silent both at parents' meetings and in political life.

It is also well known that the focus in schools is on written language. The problem for most teachers seems to be how to make the children work in silence, not to develop oral skills. And most teachers are not trained to plan and organise speech education (Hanf Buckley, 1995, p 41):

It is common to observe teachers nodding politely whenever oral language is mentioned ...but upon returning to their classrooms, teaching English as usual. Why should it be otherwise? A teacher does not teach what he or she does not know, does not value, or does not have the skills for. Unless teachers are provided with persuasive answers to these questions, I predict that oral language...will be neglected.

I agree with Buckley, and I have tried to find some answers to these questions. Primarily we have to find out about what is considered as *good* in children's speech. In other words we need assessment criteria, not for the assessment itself, but to guide us as to what we should focus on in speech education. The children also need explicit feedback. They have no use for an overall impression in general terms, since it gives no guidance to *what* is good and *what* should be improved. Hence, the aim of this study was to:

- describe children's speech,
- develop criteria for the assessment of children's speech and
- describe and analyse children's language pragmatics in speech in relation to this assessment.

Methods

About 600 pupils in Swedish Compulsory School were chosen randomly to perform an oral task. The pupils were to tell the teacher 'what I think my life will be like in 25 years time'. The teacher was asked to try to get the pupil to speak as continuously as possible so that the situation should not end up as an interview. Each pupil was given a few minutes to think, and some suggestions as to what to speak about, namely living conditions, family, work and spare time.

The design of the study was not decided from the beginning: rather the research process has been developed in stages. In the spirit of qualitative methods, a description of the phenomenon 'speech at age 11' is given first. Thereafter, using quantitative methods, a causal connection between children's speech and language pragmatics was sought. In the first stage, intensive studies were made of four different pupils with the aim of generating hypotheses to test in some following stages. In the last stage the speech of 101 pupils was analysed in order to find out if there were any significant criteria. To find the criteria, about 70 student teachers and teacher education staff were asked to assess the four pupils on a four-point scale. The assessors were also asked to explain the level chosen. These explanations were analysed in order to find characteristics or criteria for each level.

The transcriptions of the speech were also analysed in terms of language pragmatics, based on the concepts in Anward's theory of linguistic development (1983). According to his model the most advanced style is built upon structures such as aims and means, cause and effect, advantages and disadvantages. By this it is meant that the presentation contains reflections about how something fits together. Since my starting point was the problem of gaining influence in a democratic society, it was interesting see if giving arguments and explaining one's thoughts would be a significant criterion as well.

Results

The criteria on presentation, which have proven significant, are *hesitation, interruption, involvement* and *easiness of manner*. The significant criteria on language pragmatics have been number of *words, themes, explanations* and *reflections*.

Presentation

9% of the pupils were assessed at Level 1, which meant:

- many hesitations and interruptions
- no involvement
- no easiness of manner

51% of the pupils were assessed at Level 2, which meant:

- less hesitations and interruptions than in level 1
- only a short time of involvement
- no easiness of manner

34 % of the pupils were assessed at Level 3, which meant:

- no disturbing hesitations or interruptions
- only a short time of involvement
- no easiness of manner

6% of the pupils were assessed at Level 4, which meant:

- no disturbing hesitations or interruptions
- high involvement
- total easiness of manner
- The pupil plays the role of the Narrator

Figure 1 Speech skill related to language pragmatics (mean values of first utterance)

Speech skill	Words	Themes	Explanations	Words in reflection
very weak, 9%	12	1	0.0	0.0
rather weak, 51%	26	2	0.1	1.1
rather good, 34%	68	3	0.6	7.9
very good, 6%	123	4	1.7	21.8

The table above shows mean values from the variance analysis (Anova). The children's first utterance, before the teacher started to support them by asking questions, showed the most significant correlation between presentation and the chosen language parameters. In other words the skills required by pupils to give good oral presentations might be said to be the following:

- Ability to take the floor
- Ability to find a theme
- Ability to explain
- Ability to speak reflectively
- Ability to take on the role of narrator

Theories of Interpretation

Dewey (1933), Vygotskij (1980; 1986) and Bernstein (1974) provide, by way of their theoretical terms, interesting starting points for the interpretation and understanding of the results.

Vygotskij explains why a person's speech can be explicit or implicit. The connection between outer and inner speech is not always so strong, that is the skill to speak and the actual ability may be linked to varying degrees. The situation and the relationship between those speaking have considerable importance for how a person chooses to express their thoughts. Their view of the role of the cultural environment and the role of the teacher is also of great importance for the pedagogical consequences of teaching.

Bernstein adopts the same stance as Vygotskij as far as the environment and the spoken language is concerned. It is the linguistic environment which the children live in which is incorporated by them. Moreover, the attitude within the home is of great importance for the development of explicit speech or, to use Bernstein's term, 'elaborated code'. Those who live in an environment in which one often talks explicitly are likely to find it easier to express thoughts explicitly, even without time to plan.

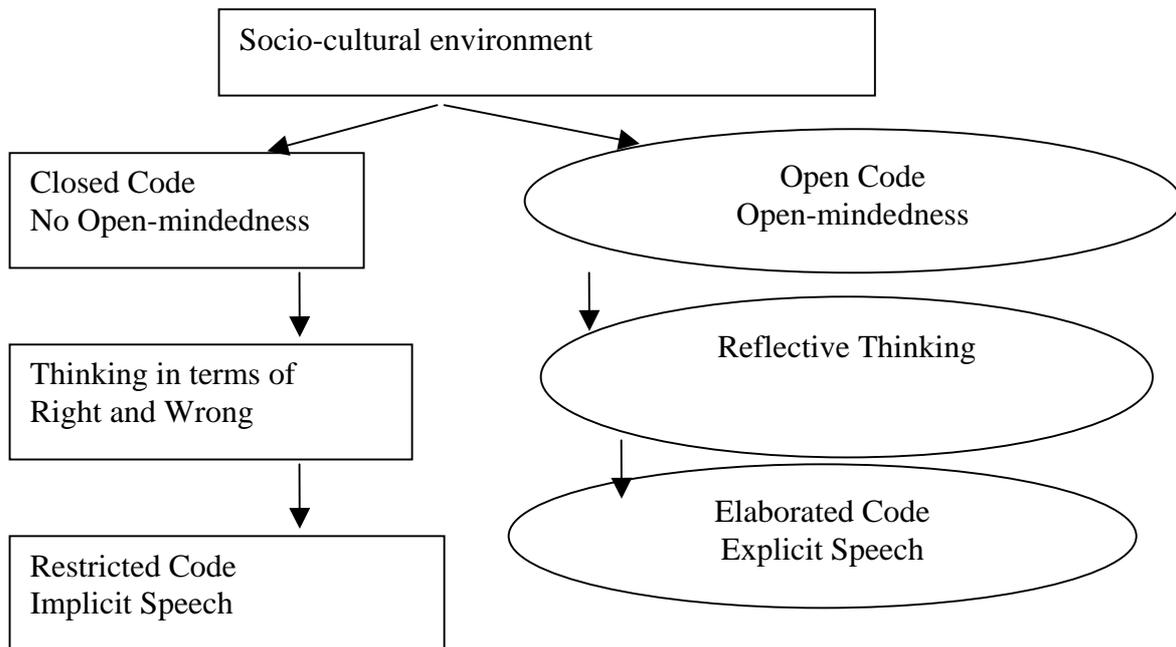
Dewey discusses which attitude is important for children at school to develop reflective thinking. A reflective attitude demands, to use Dewey's term, an attitude of 'open-mindedness'. In homes using what Bernstein calls an 'open code', it is common that one

formulates judgement, gives arguments and sees the consequences of one's reasoning. Such a code can also be described as reflective.

If language and thinking are to be developed, pupils' environments must be characterised by an open code without the provision of answers. In such an environment pupils must express themselves explicitly, in order to be understood. In an environment dominated by a closed code there are questions and answers provided. The pupils only need to provide brief factual answers. There are no thoughts, which can be played with, which, is why no reflective language is required.

The picture below shows how the chosen key-terms of these theories fit together in a way that makes them relevant to the interpretation of this study:

Figure 2



Interpretation of the results

Ability to take the floor

Many pupils speak quite fluently and sound involved, but few children take on the role of an independent narrator. Only six per cent of the children showed signs of free narration, which meant that 94 per cent or more of the pupils have a way of speaking which sounds more as though they are answering questions, rather than giving an oral presentation of their own. A possible interpretation of this result is that pupils at school are accustomed to a 'question and answer' way of working.

The quantity, i.e. the number of words, has proved to be a qualitative indicator as far as this study is concerned. According to Anward (1983) the monological speech represents a higher level than the dialogical. In this sense, the assessments agree with Anward's model for speech development, the more monological the better. Dewey (1933) speaks of

the ability to follow up a thought, which may even be seen as a quality in those pupils who speak for a longer time. Those pupils who speak for a longer time may even be assumed to be those who are used to a developed code (Bernstein, 1974).

Ability to find a theme

The number of themes often corresponds to the suggested themes provided in the instructions, but more than half of the children came up with their own theme to talk about. Thus most of the children did not have any difficulty in expressing themselves about the future. A small number of pupils did not however have anything to say on the suggested themes.

Ability to explain

Many children did not give any argument at all. The pupils who did give an explanation often argued for only one of their thoughts on the future, which is why many of the thoughts existed only as brief statements. According to Corson (1988), it is common that primary school children list their thoughts without argument. In the project 'The Educational Theory of Reflecting' (Joensson and Selander, 1992) it is stated that primary school children do have a more developed language when participating in philosophical conversation than was previously thought possible for that age group. In this study, there is an absence of explanations and arguments from most of the pupils until the teacher steps in with questions. The pupils who obtained positive assessments on the other hand have often given spontaneous explanations. Thus it is believed that many children need help to develop this ability.

Typical of the language of the children who received negative assessments is that it is reminiscent of the restricted code, because arguments are seldom used. The restricted closed communication system (Bernstein, 1974) does not encourage the investigation of individual intentions and motives. One explanation of the fact that so many children express themselves in a hesitating and embarrassed manner may be that the task is about individual intentions.

The pupil's arguments might be what we hear as involvement, especially if they are expressed without the support of a question. In other words, this may mean that an involved pupil explains himself spontaneously and when the pupils argue for their statements they sound involved. The arguments in the first statement occur almost exclusively in those pupils who have received positive assessments. Spontaneous arguments are also one of the language parameters which distinguish the two groups of average pupils (level 2 and 3).

Ability to speak reflectively

Over half the pupils did not show any sign of being able to express themselves reflectively. Without the help of the teacher, around 85 per cent of the pupils did not express reflections. The reason may be that school conversations have traditionally been based on facts or statements. The greater part of the pupil's speech can be characterised as statements. A clear difference between the speech assessed as positive and that assessed as negative is linked to reflection. A decisive criterion in assessing presentation was involvement during the whole of the speech. This skill sorted out those judged negatively from those judged positively. To list statements without connection to thoughts of one's own is indicative of those who were judged to be weaker speakers.

According to Bernstein's theories, children start school with highly variable language habits. Reflections about the future do not occur with the same frequency in all families. According to Vygotskij's theories it may be that children who are used to converting their thoughts into spoken language automatically are able to speak in an explicit way, and do not require much planning time. In other cases it is possible that it is the implicit inner speech which comes out in an incomplete form. Such speech is thus more scanty or reserved, which is typical of the language use of those groups assessed as negative.

Taking on the role of narrator

To manage a developed code also requires social training (Bernstein, 1974). Some children received negative assessments in spite of the fact that their speech contained arguments and reflections to the same degree as those children who received positive assessments. One explanation may be that the former group has difficulty in dealing with the role.

According to the result of this study very few of the pupils managed to play the role of independent narrator (Anward, 1983). It is possible that the pupil's level of activity also lies in that field which we call involvement. The weak or passive ones sound unwilling or passive and reply to questions only because they have to. In this case it is reasonable to interpret their speech as not independent.

Pedagogical implications

It may be considered a paradox that the pupils who receive positive assessments are those who do not conform to school life and answer questions. Anward (1983) believes that the use of language is the key. According to this research, more than half the pupils sounded hesitant, embarrassed and lacking in independence. Could this mean that half the pupils do not feel comfortable with their teacher and have a passive role in school? In that case formal language training is hardly the solution. We must also think about how we can get the pupils to take on a more active or independent role.

According to unanimous research results, children from lower social groups seem to have difficulty in taking an active role as pupils. We do not know if, by using an open code and creating an atmosphere of open-mindedness, the school can teach all children to take the floor. But it is improbable, that a closed code, with emphasis on terms of right and wrong, will make it easier for socially weaker children to develop an active role and a reflective language and thinking.

It also seems to be an important task for the school to teach children to give arguments and not simply produce statements. If such language is to be used in a test situation with little time for planning, the pupil should probably be required to develop this code as a part of their daily work at school.

This study shows that the vast majority of children do not formulate any arguments or reflections at all without help of the teacher. They seem to prefer to find a quick answer. Perhaps the above mentioned philosophical discussion are of importance in teaching speech too.

Developing a child's speech will also have a bearing on both the 'school preparation' at nursery school and on parents' attitudes. The teachers in the lower grades often ask the parents to listen to their children reading for a quarter of an hour each day. This habit has

been proven to have an important impact on reading. Perhaps it is just as important to also ask parents to listen to their children speaking for a quarter of an hour every day.

Finally I will emphasise that it is an important task for schools to get the pupils to understand that school is a place where they are supposed to speak reflectively and explain themselves. Many children are not used to that at home, which means that if all children should have a chance to develop citizenship competence, it is necessary to focus more on speech competence in the curriculum. If National Evaluations were to include speech regularly, this would also have effect in guiding and developing knowledge about teaching oral skills at school.

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