Social Class in Language in Education Research

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Abstract

Social class has always been a key mediating factor for access to and performance in education, even if the attention it has received has varied: in some cases, it has been minimal, and in other cases, the construct has suffered a kind of *erasure* (i.e., it has disappeared from the lexicon of researchers). The trend toward the latter has been particularly pronounced in research in language education. This chapter takes on the task of discussing research on language and social class in education. After briefly clarifying what we might mean by social class and what it entails, the chapter first covers early developments in class-based language in education research, before moving on to consider, in order, major contributions, work in progress, problems, and difficulties, and finally, future directions in this area. The aim is to provide the reader with a flavor of past, present, and future work in this all-important corner of language in education research.

Keywords

Social class • Language education • Poltical economy • Marxist thought • Recognition and redistribution

Contents

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Introduction

In their oft-cited book, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Bowles and Gintis (1976) wrote about the ways in which educational systems in capitalist societies shape and prepare individuals for their class-based positions in these societies in the following way:

> [S]chooling fosters and rewards the development of certain capacities and the expression of certain needs, while thwarting and penalising others. ... [It] tailors the self-concepts, aspirations, and social class identifications of individuals to requirements of the social division of labor. (p. 129)

Indeed, what the authors wrote here is something of a fundamental truth about the function of education in capitalist societies, and it is one that can be found in the work of key authors who have critiqued capitalism. Thus, while Marx (1990) condemned the denial of education to child factory workers in nineteenth-century England as a way of keeping the proletariat in its place, Gramsci (1971) discussed the division in Italian education in the early twentieth century between "the vocational school for the instrumentalist classes ... [and] the classical school for the dominant classes and the intellectuals" (p. 26). Such a division in education, which in effect became a powerful force in the reproduction of established class relations in twentieth-century societies, is the center-point of critiques of education in the 1970s and 1980s in contexts such as France (Bourdieu 1984), the USA (Apple 1982), and the UK (Young 1971). Meanwhile, the entire notion of one type of school for the powerful (and some sections of the middle class), and another type of school for the remainder of the population, is a constant in more recent studies of social class in education in the twenty-first century in countries such as China (Sheng 2014), Japan (Kiriya 2013), India (LaDousa 2014), the USA (Weis et al. 2014), and the UK (Reay et al. 2011).

The majority of social class scholars today follow a line of thought through Weber (1968) and Bourdieu (1984) and have developed what I have termed a *constellation-of-dimensions* approach (Block 2015). Following this approach, researchers see an individual's class position in society as ever-evolving and comprised of one one's economic resources (e.g., income, wealth, property, material possessions), social resources (occupation, education, prestige, social networking), behavior (consumption patterns, pass times; symbolic presentation of self), and life conditions (type of dwelling, type of neighborhood, quality of life, mobility, physical health). However, it should be noted that these different dimensions are interrelated rather than freestanding and that it is not just matter of slotting people into class categories based on the itemization of each one. In addition, class is a relational phenomenon

which arises when individuals and groups interact in the course of their engagement in social activity. And, as an historical phenomenon, it should not be seen as "a 'structure', nor even as a 'category', but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships" (Thompson 1980, p. 8). Finally, it is worth framing any discussion of class in terms of Marx's (1988) distinction between *class in itself* and *class for itself*, where the former refers to the real, lived class experiences of people such as their work conditions, standard of living, financial situation, spatial relations, and life chances, while the latter refers to what is in essence, class consciousness' or people's subjective understandings of their living conditions, their interests, and how they engage in class-based behavior.

With this understanding of social class in mind, I take on the task of discussing research on language and social class in education. First, I discuss early developments in class-based research before moving on to consider, in order, major recent contributions, problems and difficulties, and future directions. Given space restrictions, my coverage of this topic will be selective and partial. However, my aim is to provide the reader with a flavor of past, present, and future work in this all-important corner of language in education research.[1]

Early Developments

Labov (1966) is a good starting point for any review of research on the relationship between language and class. Via questionnaires, he established the class positions of his informants in terms of education, occupation, and income, before considering how the uses of particular features of spoken English (morphological, syntactic, lexical, and, above all, phonetic) index class positions. Labov's work was in fact about language in society in general, and not specifically education, but his findings have always had implications for language education, not least because the language ideologies which undergird judgments made about language use outside of educational contexts also govern judgments made about language use within language education.

More directly relevant to the field of language education was Bernstein's (1971) work on class in Britain, which emerged roughly in parallel with Labov's research. Bernstein's starting point was social structures in society, and he argued that particular language practices not only contribute to the constitution of these structures, but they also mediate the maintenance, reproduction, and strengthening of them in education. A major element of Bernstein's thinking about class was a theory of language socialization; he posited that different types of family and different types of codes used by individuals and collectives served as reproductive mechanisms for class hierarchies. These family types were the idealized extremes: "position oriented" and "person oriented." The former family type lived in smaller dwellings and functioned according to clear and well-defined notions of authority and social roles.

[1]NB From this point onwards, I use the word "class" to refer to "social class" for stylistic reasons.

Meanwhile, the latter family type lived in larger dwellings, with more individual and personal space, and functioned more according to dialogue and respect for the individual than authority and clear roles. The former family type was seen as prototypically working class, while the latter was prototypically middle class.

Emerging in such family environments and a range of social contexts were different ways of using language. Here Bernstein posited two general codes, once again as idealized opposites. "Restricted code" was associated with working-class families and their children and entailed a lack of affiliation to institutionalized discourses of education. In turn, "elaborated code" was associated with middle-class families and their children and entailed an affiliation to the institutionalized discourses of education. When children go to school, however, they encounter what Bernstein (1975) calls the "three main message systems" which structure most activity (curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation): "[c]curriculum defines what counts as a valid knowledge, pedagogy defines what counts as a valid transmission of knowledge, and evaluation defines what counts as a valid realization of this knowledge" (p. 85). Through these three message systems, a class-based culture is shaped around particular ways of framing thinking about the world, particular patterns of acceptable and legitimized behavior, and a value system, derived from curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation, respectively. When Bernstein's work first appeared, there was a great deal of controversy around the notions of restricted and elaborated codes, with Labov, Bourdieu, and many others taking issue with what they saw as a "deficit theory" (Labov 1972) or even the "fetichization" of middle-class language use patterns (Bourdieu 1991, p. 53). Nevertheless, as Bernstein (1990) himself tried to explain, "the code theory accepts neither a deficit nor a difference position but draws attention to the relations between macro power relations and micro practices of transmission, acquisition and evaluation and the positioning and oppositioning to which these practices give rise" (pp. 118–119).

Relevant to this chapter is how Bernstein operated as researcher, and here deficiencies in his work are far clearer. Indeed, Rampton, a sympathetic reader of Bernstein, describes him as "emphatically non-ethnographic" (Rampton 2010, p. 7). In essence, Bernstein's forte was high-level theorizing, and fieldwork was not an integral part of his work. For the latter, we need to move to educational anthropology and examine two paradigmatic studies by Heath (1983) and Eckert (1989). Heath compared and contrasted the language socialization practices of the residents of two communities in the southeastern part of the USA in the 1970s: Roadville residents were white people who for generations had worked in the mills and constituted an upwardly mobile working class; Trackton residents were African-Americans who were new to the mills, having worked previously in agriculture, and who constituted something of an emergent, though still inchoate, working-class community. Heath makes mention of this intra-working-class difference, as well as references to the practices of "townspeople," who were the more established middle-class local elite. Although a full-blown class-based analysis is never developed in Heath's research (issues around race and ethnicity were far more central), her work still advanced our

understanding of class differences in language/education given that many of the socialization process she documented may be seen as class-based and not just racially/ethnically based (e.g., how the upwardly mobile white working-class parents adopted more paradigmatically middle-class language socialization patterns than the African-American working-class parents).

Meanwhile, Eckert documented the social and linguistic practices of white middle-class and working-class students attending a suburban Detroit secondary school in the 1980s. She outlined in detail how two adolescent identities were predominant in the school: the "burnouts," who "came from ... working class home[s], enrolled primarily in general and vocational courses, smoked tobacco and pot, took chemicals, drank beer and hard liquor, skipped classes, and may have had occasional run-ins with the police," and the "jocks," who were "middle class and college bound, played sports for the school, participated in school activities, got respectable grades, and drank beer on weekends" (Eckert 1989, p. 3). Ultimately, the jocks were more cooperative and aligned themselves to the school culture, while the burnouts maintained an adversarial relationship with school culture and in essence opted out of it. Similar to Heath, Eckert does not provide as much class-based analysis as she might have done. Still, her research does advance the notion that schools are sites of class reproduction in societies and the mechanisms therein.

Of interest here is the way that the two authors carried out their research. First of all, both were accomplished ethnographers who adopted a range of data collection techniques from anthropology and other social sciences. Both passed long periods of time embedded in their research contexts (Heath for some 9 years, from 1969 to 1978), as they observed behavior and took field notes, carried out a range of different types of interviews with informants, and collected speech samples in a variety of contexts, both in school and outside school. Heath (1983) notes how research in education up to the 1970s had tended to be "quantitative, global, sociodemographic, and dependent on large-scale comparisons of many schools" (p. 8). What she proposed instead was a form of deep ethnography, which saw her not only collecting data but establishing long-lasting relationships with her informants as she participated in their day-to-day activities. The aim was the documentation and study of "social life as and where it is lived through the medium of a particular social group" (Heath 1983, p. 9). Meanwhile, Eckert advanced the variationist tradition begun by Labov (op. cit.), examining how "the meaning of variation lies in its role in the construction of styles," which entails "not simply placing variables in styles, but in understanding this placement as an integral part of the construction of social meaning" (Eckert 2003, p. 43). The work of Heath, Eckert, and others who followed them set a certain standard for language education research in general, as well as for research focusing on class. In the next section, I examine how a research agenda organized around class has continued to exist since Labov, Bernstein, Heath, and Eckert, albeit sporadically and not always with a great deal of attention to exactly what is meant by class and class relations in society.

Major Recent Contributions

In the late 1990s, Rampton (2006) set out to describe and analyze the communicative activity of London secondary school students, both in and out of school. He recorded students in a range of contexts, the classroom being the most typical, and he analyzed the English they spoke. This English was what Cheshire et al. (2011) have recently termed call "Multicultural London English," that is, an English spoken in London which embodies a series of identifiable features from traditional Cockney and the Englishes spoken in the Caribbean, South Asia, and the USA. Rampton focused on the Cockney features in his informants' speech, particularly when these were produced in an exaggerated manner. He contrasted what he saw as both natural and performed Cockney with performed "posh" English, where the latter refers to any English that young people see as institutional and middle class (e.g., the language of education). Ultimately, the different ways of speaking English may be seen as *enregistered voices* in that "they index stereotypic social personae" and "social formations in the sense that some language users but not others are socialized in their use and construal" (Agha 2005, pp. 39–49). However, the indexing of "posh" as the *other* in the speech of these young people does not mean that they manifested a strong sense of class consciousness in their day-to-day discourse and activity. Indeed, Rampton found that they seldom explicitly positioned themselves in class terms and that their public constructions of their identities tended to be mediated by notions of race, ethnicity, and gender.

While Rampton's work is primarily about the linguistic resources of his informants, he also situates himself in a broader movement in sociolinguistics research away from a focus exclusively on the linguistic, to a focus on multimodal repertoires. Such a move entails a consideration of "the set of resources that a speaker actually commands rather than … abstract linguistic models" (Snell 2013, p. 115). Eckert's research (op. cit.) was trendsetting in this regard as she situated variation within style and style as central to communication. More recently, she has emphasized that "variables do not come into a style with a specific, fixed meaning, but take on such meaning in the process of construction of the style" (Eckert 2003, p. 43). Elsewhere, Coupland (2007) defines style as "a way of doing something" (p. 1), which involves the deployment of a range of semiotic resources to achieve the indexical effect of an *enregistered voice*. A related term, stylization, refers to the "reflexive communicative action in which speakers produce specially marked and often exaggerated representations of languages, dialects, accents, registers or styles that lie outside their habitual repertoire" (Rampton 2011, p. 3). Meanwhile, stance is understood as "a person's expression of their relationship to their talk (their epistemic stance – e.g., how certain they are about their assertions), and a person's expression of their relationship to their interlocutors (their interpersonal stance – e.g., friendly or dominating)" (Kiesling 2009, p. 172).

Snell (2013) provides good working examples of how this amalgam of constructs comes together as she examines linguistic variation, multimodal repertoires, and stylization and stance, focusing on preadolescent/adolescent speech patterns and forms in the north of England. Observation is a part of this research, but most

important are the recordings of real-life interactions taking place between key informants and the different people they encounter during their school day. Like Labov, Eckert, and Rampton, Snell's task is the fine-grained analysis of particular linguistic features (e.g., the use of "me" as a possessive pronoun) as overall identity markers, as well as class markers, both locally and in British society at large. She then frames trends that she finds as *enregistered voices* (Agha, op. cit.) and establishes both how a class condition, as way of life, may be seen to generate particular identities in society and how identity is made, as emergent and as effect, via the use of particular speech patterns and other multimodal behavior.

This type of research falls within the realm of Marx's (op. cit.) *class in itself*, and what Rampton (2006) calls the "ordinary experience, and everyday discourses, activities and practices – the 'primary realities' of practical activity" (p. 222). But what of research on language and class in educational contexts which may be seen to be about Marx's *class for itself*, and what Rampton (2006) calls "secondary or 'meta-level' representations," that is, "ideologies, images, and discourses about social groups, about the relations of power between them, and about their different experiences of material conditions and practical activity" (pp. 222–223)? The answer to this question is that while there has been research focusing on Rampton's "secondary or 'meta-level' representations" in a range of language in education settings, such as complementary schools in Britain (Blackledge and Creese 2010), secondary school Japanese returnees (Kanno 2003), secondary school students in London (Harris 2006), and universities in Britain (Preece 2010), there has been little mention of class in this work, with Harris going into such issues more than most.

Problems and Difficulties

The biggest problem with class in language education research is its relative erasure and the fact that even when it is cited as important, it is seldom, if ever, defined in any detail (Rampton (2006) is a notable exception). However, beyond clarity regarding what class *is*, there is a long list of issues arising around the use of class as key construct. Here I will briefly deal with just two, the first being the relationship between class and identity. Is class an identity dimension, much like race, gender, or nationality? Or is it different? As I note elsewhere (Block 2014), there has been a tendency in the humanities and social sciences in recent years for scholars to adopt what might be termed a "culturist" approach to identity. This approach has arisen above all in the economically advanced nation-states of the world (and particularly in the Anglophone world), and it is connected with the rise of what some call "identity politics" or what Fraser (Fraser and Honneth 2003) sees as struggles related to "recognition." Recognition is about respect for others and a focus on key identity markers such as nationality, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality, as well as the relationship of the individual to society at large, both as individual and as member of a community (or communities). Recognition may be seen as either in conflict with or as articulated with what Fraser calls "redistribution," which is concerned with the material bases of the life experiences people living as "collective

subjects of injustice [in] classes or class-like collectives, which are defined economically by a distinctive relation to the market or the means of production" (Fraser and Honneth 2003, p. 14). Fraser sets up a philosophical dilemma when she laments how "[t]he discourse of social justice, once cantered on distribution, is now increasingly divided between claims for distribution, on the one hand, and claims for recognition, on the other" (Fraser and Honneth 2003, pp. 7–8), attributing this shift to developments such as the demise of communism (both as a material and discursive alternative to capitalism), the rise to dominance of neoliberal economic ideology, and the aforementioned rise of identity politics.

One basic point here is that even if it intersects with identity dimensions, which Fraser sees as part of claims of recognition, class is not a modality of being of the same type as race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, or sexuality because it is first and foremost in the realm of distribution and redistribution of material resources, and it is not about respect and recognition. The solution to societal ills like racism and sexism, it seems, is for people to stop being racist and sexist, to accept diversity and to respect others as equals. These remedies do not work when it comes to class and class-based inequality, as accepting another's relative poverty and respecting the position in society that it affords do not do anything to overturn material-based inequality. As Sayer (2005) has noted, the poor do not wish to have their poverty and poor living conditions affirmed, legitimized, and validated by mainstream middle-class and upper-class members of the society. What they want is the abolishment of class differences or, more modestly, their own individual escape from the relative deprivation and underprivileged conditions in which they live. In this case, recognition and respect are not enough, and language education research that has focused on class has not delved into this issue. And this is why the relative erasure of class from educational research is a genuine concern.

Another issue arising is how to develop an affective/experiential/psychological perspective, whereby class is understood as a "structure of feeling," that is, a collection of "characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; … of consciousness and relationships; … [of] thought as felt and feeling as thought" (Williams 1977, p. 132). In Sennett and Cobb (1972), we see in practice what Williams is writing about. These authors explore the "hidden injuries of class" and the feelings of inadequacy, disappointment, disillusionment, and lack of fulfillment manifested by white working-class Americans living in the last years of Keynesian economics in the late 1960s. These individuals worry about a range of issues, from their own job security to the future of their children, whom they hope will do better than they have in life. Some years later, Bourdieu (1999) accessed similar sentiments among members of working class in 1990s France, who were starting to feel the effects of the first major wave of neoliberal policies in effect from the mid-1980s onward. More recently, there is talk of new experiences and dispositions among workers who are reframed as "neoliberal citizens": "neoliberalism normatively constructs and interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life … figure[ing] them … as rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for 'self-care' – the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions" (Brown 2005, p. 43). This view of new ways

of being resonates with Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) notion of the "new spirit of capitalism," which entails, among other things, the priming of the private over the public, individualism over solidarity, and flexibility over stability, all of which links back to Foucault's (2008) prescient work from 1979 on new technologies of the self in the (then nascent) neoliberal regimes of policy, practice, and discourse. The challenge is how to develop a coherent affective/experiential/psychological perspective on class based on the thinking of the authors cited here, which can then be operationalized in research. To date, this challenge has not been taken up by language education researchers.

Future Directions

The two issues mentioned in the previous section are obvious bases for future research on class in language education. Another is class-based research on the teaching and learning of foreign languages around the world. This would include both English as an international language in most parts of the world and the teaching and other languages such as French, Mandarin, Arabic, and Spanish, which for different reasons have made their way onto the national curricula in a good number of countries (e.g., Mandarin, due to the rise of China as an economic powerhouse; French, due to its historical extension around the world). As I note elsewhere (Block 2012, 2014), in research on foreign language teaching and learning, class has appeared only sporadically and indeed has hardly been present.

Other language and teaching contexts which have received the attention of researchers, but without much attention to class, include English language immersion schools around the world (de Mejia 2002); French and Spanish immersion schools in North America (Heller 2006; Palmer 2009, respectively), complementary schools in increasingly multicultural and multilingual countries across Europe and other parts of the world (Lytra and Martin 2010); study abroad and student exchange programs around the world (Kinginger 2013); and "internationalized" higher education around the world in which English-medium instruction has become a common language education modality (Jenkins 2014). In all of these contexts, there is unequal access to and competence in the languages taught and learned as they both index and are indexed by class. However, while research to date has been effective in bringing certain socio-political issues to the fore (e.g., the language rights of individuals, enduring racism in many societies), there has been relatively little specific focus on the class-based issues arising. More could (and should) be done.

Cross-References

- ► Discourse Analysis in Educational Research
- ► Ethnography and Language Education
- ► Linguistic Ethnography
- ► Researching Identity in Language and Education

► Researching the Language of Race and Racism in Education
► Second Language Acquisition and Identity

Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

James Collins and Ben Rampton: Language, Class, and Education. In Volume: Language Policy and Political Issues in Education

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