Changing Teachers' Perceptions of Low-Achieving Students' Cultural Capital and Habitus

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Abstract

In general, low-achieving students in Singapore schools have been reported to perform well in literacy tests (PIRLS), compared to their counterparts in other countries. However, for these students to achieve an even higher level of literacy skills in English, as promoted by the latest English Language Syllabus, classroom discourse patterns will need to change. The purpose of this study is to highlight the negative classroom discourse which contributes to the limited literacy experience in the lower stream classroom. Using Bourdieu's framework of cultural capital and habitus, we examined four transcripts from the lower stream in non-elite primary and secondary school classrooms to show that students, aged 11 and 15 years respectively, in these classes received a limited literacy experience. Our data sources come from two studies, one of which is part of a large scale study, which sought to study classroom practices in Singapore schools, whereas the second one was ethnographic in its methodology which used interviews with teachers in its analysis. The preliminary findings indicate that teachers ascribed low linguistic capital and habitus to low-achieving students, and characterized them as a community of poor readers and writers. We will show how these transcripts can be transformed to encourage and motivate students towards higher expectations of their English competence. Teacher educators in pre- and in-service education could use these modified transcripts to highlight and transform the classroom discourse of low-achieving students, especially in terms of the identity teachers ascribe to students.

Introduction

This paper examines two teachers' perceptions of their students' cultural capital and habitus, specifically the linguistic capital and habitus, of low-achieving students in one primary and one secondary school. It draws on the theoretical notions of cultural capital and habitus by Bourdieu (1991). These two teachers' perceptions of these students' abilities seemed to affect the way they constructed and enacted their classroom talk. This paper proposes the use of productive classroom talk (Mercer and Littleton, 2007) to remediate the literacy experiences of low-achieving students.

Cultural and Linguistic Capital and Habitus

Carrington and Luke (1997) define Bourdieu's cultural capital as the physical and psychic embodiment of a person's durable dispositions in their families and communities, i.e., their embodied skills and competencies in those areas. Linguistic capital, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), a component of cultural capital, represents the speech and style of a person, acquired unconsciously from social interactions with his family and school mates. These linguistic dispositions form the *habitus* of an individual that orients their actions and inclinations in daily life. The quote below from Bourdieu (1980) summarizes the concept of *habitus*:

"Les conditionnements associés à une classe particulière de conditions d'existence produisent des *habitus*, systèmes de dispositions durables et transposables, structures structurées
prédisposées à fonctionner comme structures structurantes, c'est-à-dire en tant que principes générateurs et organisateurs de pratiques et de représentations qui peuvent être objectivement adaptées à leur but sans supposer la visée consciente de fins et la maîtrise expresse des opérations nécessaires pour les atteindre, objectivement 'réglées' et 'régulières' sans être en rien le produit de l'obéissance à des règles et, étant tout cela, collectivement orchestrées sans être le produit de l'action organisatrice d'un chef d'orchestre". (Bourdieu, 1980: 88-89).

Bourdieu (2003) explains that linguistic utterances or expressions are produced in a particular context or market, which assigns a certain value to these linguistic products. Speakers of more valued linguistic products possess more linguistic capital, and occupy a more desirable spot in the social space compared to speakers of less valued linguistic products. Bourdieu (2003) argues that this has implications for members of the lower classes, whose *habitus* is different from that of the upper classes.

Linguistic Capital in the Singapore Context

In Singapore, although there are four official languages, English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, the values assigned to these languages are not equal. Apart from the fact that English is the medium of instruction in primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions, it also has a gatekeeping function which allows, or prevents, continued education and, thus future job opportunities for the individual. Thus, compared to other languages, it is the most valued linguistic resource in Singapore. In Table 1 below (adapted from the Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010), it is clear

that the occurrence of English as the predominant household language increased along with the higher education qualifications held by the head of household. The more highly educated the head of the household is, the more likely it is for him/her to speak predominantly English at home. For instance, 9.5% of primary school graduates speak English most frequently at home compared to 53.6% of university graduates. There appears to be an association between English and the attainment of a degree.

Table 1

Resident Households by Predominant Household Language and Highest Qualification Attained by Head of Household

Language	Total	No Qualification	Primary	Lower Secondary	Secondary	Post Sec (non-Tertiary)	Polytechnic	Other Diploma	University
English	32.1%	5.6%	9.5%	17.4%	33.4%	33.5%	43.2%	49.7%	53.6%
Mandarin	35.4%	36.2%	45.4%	46.1%	35.9%	35.9%	36.8%	29.1%	26.6%
Chinese Dialects	15.8%	11.4%	24.5%	18.2%	11.7%	9.1%	7.6%	8.8%	5.3%
Malay	10.5%	2.9%	16.7%	14.6%	15.2%	17.0%	6.6%	4.8%	1.5%
Indian Languages	4.9%	3.9%	3.9%	3.6%	3.1%	4.1%	5.0%	6.1%	8.8%
Others	1.2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0.3%	0.9%	1.6%	4.1%

Source: Adapted from Department of Statistics (2010)

It is important to note that in Singapore, linguistic capital refers to the ability to understand and use educated speech, which is Standard Singapore English instead of the local varieties of English (Sullivan, 2001). Speakers of the non-standard variety of English, Singlish, are not taken as seriously as speakers of Standard Singapore English in Singapore as it is not considered to be a legitimate language (Rubdy, 2005).

The relationship between productive teacher-student talk and educational success

Given that school functions as a site of social stratification (Lin, 1999; Luke, 1996) where the display of linguistic (or other forms of) capital is concerned, teachers play an important role in creating learning opportunities for all students. The literature has shown that the quality of teacher-student talk contributes to students' learning opportunities (Alexander, 2004; Seehouse, 1996; Walsh, 2010). For example, Mercer and Littleton (2007) argue that classroom talk is the main pedagogical tool for teachers to create shared experiences with students, without which some students from disadvantaged homes may not gain access to some useful ways of using language as a tool for reasoning, learning and working collaboratively. While these studies have shown the benefits of engaging students in productive classroom talk, which facilitates the co-construction of knowledge and therefore projects students' voice, other studies have revealed that the occasions in which students are involved in either productive or non-productive classroom talk are related to the cultural capital students display in class (Black, 2004; Caughlan and Kelly, 2004; Johnston and Hayes, 2008; Kramer-Dahl and Kwek, 2010). In Black's (2004) study, it was found that when a student demonstrated forms of cultural capital in his/her behaviour, the teacher formed high expectations of that student, accorded him/her certain communicative rights, and was less controlling. Conversely, teachers held lower expectations of students with little or no cultural capital, and reduced students'

involvement to passive, monosyllabic responses. This not only prevented the student from actively taking ownership of the meaning under discussion, but also signalled to everyone involved that her/his identity was one of non-participation.

Context of the study

Data sources

There are two data sources in this paper. The first data source comprises transcripts of two English lessons of a low-ability Grade 5 class (n = 19), which took place in 2004. The teacher was a diploma-holder of Malay ethnicity with eight years of teaching experience. The transcripts were part of a larger study conducted by the Centre of Pedagogy and Practice at the National Institute of Education, Singapore. The transcripts featured two reading comprehension lessons based on the journal of Robinson Crusoe.

The second data source consists of two transcripts of English lessons of a low-ability Grade 9 class (n = 39). The first transcript featured the pre-writing stage consisting of decoding and scaffolding activities while the second transcript showed the teacher's review of her students' personal response essays. These lessons took place in 2010 in a government 'neighbourhood' school. In the Singapore educational context, schools located in public housing estates are classified as 'neighbourhood', compared to the elite independent or government-aided schools located in more upmarket districts. In the co-educational school, the majority of the students came from a low socio-economic background which is non-English speaking. The teacher was a degree holder of Chinese ethnicity with three years of teaching experience.

The transcripts from these two data sources were analyzed for evidence of the teachers' perceptions of students' linguistic capital and habitus. To derive a thematic coherence represented in the data analysis, we adopted an interpretive approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) to coding the data.

Findings and discussion

In this paper, we will focus primarily on findings derived from the analysis of these transcripts. The data analysis revealed the teachers' perceptions of the linguistic capital and habitus of their students in terms of: (a) their choice of reading material selected before the lesson and (b) the interactions during the lesson.

The seven excerpts shown below, indicating these teachers' perceptions, are organized in the following themes:
(a) a community of poor readers with poor dispositions;
(b) a community of readers who had difficulty in reading and reading comprehension;
(c) a community of lazy readers;
(d) a community of poor writers; and
(e) a community of poor writers without a personal voice.

Excerpts 1 to 4 were taken from the transcripts of the Grade 5 English lessons where the focus was on the oral reading and the explanation of the meanings of the words

found in the reading text. In both lessons, these were followed by an exercise on a worksheet. We will show through these excerpts the teacher's perceptions of her students' linguistic capital.

A community of poor readers with poor dispositions

In Excerpt 1, the teacher began the lesson by telling them to read the Robinson Crusoe text silently. Note that words in italics show that the teacher is using the non-standard English variety. She went on to remind them that if they did not want to read, they would not do well in any paper even though the paper might be simple (lines 2-4). Her words seemed to imply that the students might not have the disposition to be good readers.

After asking the class to pronounce words such as 'large' and 'sticks', she explained that she would go through the meaning of the words in the reading passage later because she had wanted the class 'to cultivate the habit of guessing the meaning' of words (lines 37-38). This implies that she perceived the students as not having the habit of guessing meanings of words.

Excerpt 1

1	Teacher	*Yah* okay, sure. Okay, so I would like you to conduct your silent
2		reading. Remember *ah*, I've been telling you, you don't want to
3		read, there's no way you can do well in any paper even if the
4		paper is a simple paper. If there are words that you do not know. I will…
5	Male Student	Underline.
6	Teacher	Go through them later. I would like you to underline the words
7		that you do not know.
8	Male Student	Okay.
9	Teacher	You just read through the passage. I will give you five minutes,
10		*yah*?
11		[After a few minutes]
12		Have you underlined the words that you do not know how to read
13		or maybe words that you do not know its meaning? *Yah*.
14	Male Student	I only do from here to here.
15	Teacher	Very good. I can see that most of you have already finished. If
16		that's the case, can you look up so that I can continue? Very good.
17		Now, we will go through the whole passage in a systematic way,
18		okay. Now before I proceed, before I go into the actual lesson, I
19		just want to go through the first paragraph. Look at the first
20		paragraph.
21	Male Student	(Tea)cher, relaxation.
22	Teacher	Let us go through some of these words which I think you might
23		find difficult, yah? I'm looking at November 1.
24	Male	Large.

	Student	
25	Teacher	What is this word here?
26	Class	Large.
27	Teacher	Large. Am I right? *Yah*, did some of you identify this word?
28	Class	Yes.
29	Teacher	What is the meaning of 'large'?
30	Male Student	Big.
31	Teacher	Big. Very good. What about this word? How do you pronounce
32		this word?
33	Male Student	Sticks.
34	Teacher	Everyone pronounce sticks
35	Class	Sticks.
36	Teacher	Very good. Later in the lesson, I will go through their meaning.
37		Right, because I keep telling you that I want to cultivate the habit
38		of guessing the meaning, right? Okay, so right now, I'm not going
39		to give you the meaning.

In Excerpt 2, the teacher wanted her students to take the exercise seriously probably because she did not think they could pronounce the words well. By asking her students to practise reading, she seemed to signal that this class did not have the linguistic capital to read words properly or to make the appropriate pauses during reading, and that it needed extensive practice because it was not ready to sit for the oral examination.

Excerpt 2

1	Teacher	Very good. Now can we go through the first passage? You are going
2		to see these words in the passage, *yah*? So I would like you to read
3		them clearly when you come across them. Let's, *ah*, read. [Stutter]
4		November one. Are you ready?
5	Class	I…
6	Teacher	*Ah*. For the end. Wait, hold on. For the end of the year you will be
7		tested for oral.
8	Male Student	Huh.
9	Teacher	Your oral will be tested. One part will be reading, the other part will
10		be, *ah*, your oral conversation. Similar to your SA (Semester
11		Assessment) one. So I want you to take this opportunity to practise,
12		understand?
13	Class	Yes.
14	Male Student	Practise?

A community who had difficulty in reading and reading comprehension

From Excerpt 3 taken from the second lesson of the unit, the teacher showed that she had low expectations of the linguistic capital of her students when she commented that they would not know the meaning of 'improve' (lines 4-5). However, some students showed that they knew by offering the synonyms 'upgrade' (line 15) and 'becomes good' (line 16). Therefore, although she might perceive her students to lack the linguistic capital to understand the meaning of difficult words in the text, they showed that they understood the words by providing the synonyms of these 'difficult' words.

Excerpt 3

1	Class	After my morning walk, I went to work on my table again and
2		finished it. However, it was not to my liking and it wasn't long
3		before I learned to improve it.
4	Teacher	Very good. One of the words which I think you will not know is this
5		word.
6	Male Student 1	Improve.
7	Male Student 2	I know, I know. Improve.
8	Teacher	You know how to read the word, what is the meaning of the word?
9		*Yah*, so what does it mean? When you use the word 'improve', what
10		are you trying to show?
11	Male Student 1	*Ah, like I study not good, ah?*
12	Male Student 1	Upgrade.
13	Teacher	Studies not good, I improved. So studies not good, when you
14		improved what happen?
15	Male Student 1	Upgrade.
16	Male Student 2	Becomes good.
17	Teacher	Upgrade, *yah*. Do you go higher or you go lower?
18	Class	Higher.
19	Teacher	*Yah*. It's to make something better, right? Yes, or no?
20	Class	Yes.

A community of lazy readers

The teacher also perceived her students to be part of a lazy community who were not motivated to learn Standard English. In Excerpt 4, she gave an example about her students not doing their homework in order to explain the meaning of the word 'journal'. Her comment (line 3) suggested that her students formed a lazy community who did not do their English homework, and who needed to study harder because their school performance was not good enough.

Excerpt 4

1 2 3 4	Teacher	…For example today, you didn't do your homework. Then I say, how could you, huh? You, you should study harder, you know. You'll be so lazy and then you go home you get so angry because Teacher said that and you write down in your diary, right?...

Excerpts 5 to 7 were taken from a writing lesson of a personal response essay for low-achieving ninth graders. In Excerpt 5, the teacher focused on the drafting stage of writing the text type; whilst in Excerpts 6 and 7, she reviewed students' essays with them.

A community of poor writers

It followed from an earlier lesson in which the teacher focused on the procedural knowledge of writing personal response essays: use of present tense; connectors for sequencing and adding information; and organisational structure related to paragraphing. In the excerpt, the teacher found that her students did not have the ability to write the text type, despite having been given some scaffolding. She then told them that that they must have the same opening paragraph (lines 10-11). This could be the result of her perception that they did not have the linguistic capacity to craft the introduction to an essay.

Excerpt 5

1	Teacher	First paragraph, I think I'll help you start.
2		[Teacher writes on the board]
3		If you still have this paper, you can take it out and refer to it for
4		elaboration. This one, you give two finger spacing. So, you explain to me
5		what exactly is this – the programme. Class, I start off the introduction for
6		you: *Through-Train is program that is especially designed to enable the*
7		*better NA students to skip O-levels exam, and to allow them to enter*
8		*polytechnic.* From here, you can continue a bit more: *They can choose the*
9		*course they like in polytechnic so as to save one year.* So, first paragraph, I
10		want everyone to have this opening. Then after that, you can continue with
11		second paragraph.

In Excerpt 6, the teacher focused on the problem of having few passes (line 2) and that the paragraphs were poorly written (lines 3 and 10). Although she explicitly showed them how to organise the structure of the essay (lines 5-7 and 11), she did not encourage her students to actually justify their choice of school rule (lines 5-6). Instead, she instructed them to simply 're-write the paragraphs' for corrections (line 4).

Excerpt 6

1	Teacher	Class, I want you to do corrections. Those who didn't do well, you'll
2		have to rewrite one. Many of you. In fact, I only have a few passes.
3		Those passes, whatever paragraphs that are not good enough, I want
4		you to re-write the paragraphs…So, these are just some
5		pointers…Firstly one paragraph, it could be by elaboration…I want to
6		see the structure this way. So, that will be four paragraphs. So
7		conclusion, last paragraph…Out of the various rules you have
8		implemented, you select one and explain why that one is important.
9		[Teacher writes instructions on board]
10		Class, I want you to re-write the essay. This one is really badly done.
11		So I give you the pointers here. If you manage to finish it today, it's
12		even better.

A community of poor writers without a personal voice

Excerpt 7, which was based on the same lesson as Excerpt 6, shows the teacher giving the class her feedback on their personal response essay. For the entire lesson, she analysed some selected essays with the whole class. On the whole, the class did not do as well as she had expected. The main problem, according to her, was that they used an inappropriate register, as though they were writing a narrative.

When it came to Ismail, she said that she 'managed to pass him' (lines 1-2), indicating that it was difficult for her to do so because she felt that his writing was too poor. She could have asked Ismail to comment on or clarify his intentions in relation to school attendance (lines 8-9) and homework (lines 11-12). She could also have invited the rest of the class to contribute their thoughts, as allowing students the opportunity to articulate their personal voice was essential in meaning-making. Instead of making use of the opportunity to engage with and elicit responses from individuals when she posed the question 'Do you find this a sweeping statement?' (lines 4-5), she abruptly finished reviewing his work with 'I've no idea what he's trying to say' (lines 10-11) and 'So, what is the new rule you are trying to maintain?' (lines 12-13), without showing him how to connect his disjointed ideas. Overall, there was minimal engagement with students on the development of personal voice in the use of English language as envisaged by the syllabus.

Excerpt 7

1	Teacher	…Ismail *one*, I read through, I feel this that it is quite OK. I
2		managed to pass him. So over here, 'school rules are always
3		important because the students will know what they should do and
4		what they should not do. If the school rules are perfect, the students
5		will also be perfect." Do you find this a sweeping statement 'the
6		students will be better behaved'?...and one thing, he also has the
7		habit of collapsing all the points into one paragraph…Third point,
8		"the students must maintain attendance" If it is below 75, what will
9		happen? So this one can be one individual paragraph by itself… but
10		the concluding paragraph is not that strong. I've no idea what he's
11		trying to say… "Students do not always complete their daily

12 13		assignments or homework given." So what is the new rule you're trying to maintain?

Changing teacher-student interactions

In this section, we attempt to re-construct the teacher talk using a framework of dialogic talk adapted from the works of Alexander (2004), and Wegerif and Mercer (1997) so that it reflects a productive kind of teacher-student interaction that would draw students into a shared understanding of the activities in which they were engaged. We suggest four types of talk teachers could use to engage their students in their interactions: (a) clarifying, (b) sharing, (c) explanatory, and (d) cumulative.

Clarifying talk is characterized by the teacher asking questions that invite students to clarify what they mean in an earlier statement. Sharing talk occurs when the teacher opens up discussion to alternative perspectives and allows students to respond by stating their position. Explanatory talk refers to a relatively demanding form of classroom talk in which the teacher asks students to give reasons or explanations for the initial statement. In cumulative talk, the teacher uses repetitions, confirmations, and elaborations to, positively but uncritically, build on students' contributions. This kind of talk is characterised by the teacher acknowledging and incorporating contributions by students and using them to make connections between various ideas, thus facilitating the construction of common knowledge.

We applied these four levels of talk to Excerpt 7 and propose an alternative outcome to the actual classroom talk. In Example 1, instead of simply telling Ismail that his concluding paragraph was far from ideal, the teacher could engage him in sharing and explanatory talks. Following that, she could open the discussion to members of the class by engaging them in cumulative talk.

Example 1

Actual Classroom Talk	**What Could Have Been?**	**Talk**
Do you find this a sweeping statement "the students will be better behaved"?	Ismail, why did you think if the school rules were perfect, then students would be perfect as well?	Sharing talk Explanatory talk

In Example 2, the teacher could ask Ismail to elaborate on his comment. She could then engage her students in sharing talk, which could lead further into cumulative talk and involve the class in the co-construction of knowledge. It is also important that she allow sufficient wait time for students to respond to her questions.

Example 2

Actual Classroom Talk	What Could Have Been?	Talk
Third point, "the students must maintain attendance"… what will happen?	Class, let's consider the third point "the students must maintain attendance…" Ismail, can you tell me what you mean by…?	Clarifying talk
	Can someone tell me what the purpose of school rules is?	Sharing talk, leading to Cumulative talk

Most importantly, as shown in Example 3, she could explain how Ismail could improve his concluding paragraph by using explanatory talk, and by reiterating it with specific examples.

Example 3

Actual Classroom Talk	What Could Have Been?	Talk
But the concluding paragraph is not that strong. I've no idea what he's trying to say.	Ismail, what's needed in the concluding paragraph? How could you better support your ideas?	Explanatory talk
So what is the new rule you're trying to maintain?	Ismail, can you tell us the new rule you're trying to set up?	Clarifying talk
	If the main idea is repeated in the concluding paragraph, the reader will understand better what he's trying to say.	Explanatory talk

Conclusion

The findings in this study suggest that there is a mismatch between the teachers' perceptions of their students' linguistic capital and their actual linguistic ability. To the teachers, their students lacked 'the necessary linguistic capital to produce sentences that are likely to be understood and acceptable in all situations in which there is occasion to speak' (Bourdieu, 2003: 55). The primary school students were perceived by their teacher as not having the linguistic capital and habitus which were congruent with the demands of school, leading to a choice of materials that was not congruent with the students' actual linguistic ability. As Haycock (2001) pointed out, such students are systematically given less challenging literacy instruction in school as the curriculum materials provided are not challenging enough to allow opportunities for productive talk. Being repeatedly told that they lacked this crucial capital during lessons might also result in students being less motivated to improve

their command of Standard English. Consequently, this might lead to lower student outcomes and eventually lower economic capital.

The teacher's low expectations of her secondary school students' linguistic capital might lead to students being regularly involved in non-productive student-teacher interactions. We propose that by establishing a more dialogic pattern of teacher-student interaction might help students to have more voice in the classroom. However, teachers could be sensitive to students' contributions in expanding and enriching the semantic dimensions of the lesson.

It should be noted that the findings of this paper are limited to the classroom talk found in four lessons conducted by two teachers. More research is needed to explore further teachers' perceptions of low-achieving students' linguistic capital and habitus in Singapore.

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