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Sandra K. Gill  
*University of Pennsylvania*

Yukiko Kono  
*University of Pennsylvania*

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## Observations in a Multi-Ethnic Elementary School

## OBSERVATIONS IN A MULTI-ETHNIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL<sup>1</sup>

Sandra K. Gill and Yukiko Kono

This paper combines the results of two students' observations in the same two elementary school classrooms. One classroom (Classroom A) was designed primarily to teach English to speakers of other languages (ESOL), and the other (Classroom B) to teach a traditional elementary school curriculum. The observations were coordinated by one of the teachers observed and arranged so that the researchers, students of a class in sociolinguistics in education, might have the experience of conducting a preliminary ethnography. The focus of the observations was broad: language and linguistic diversity and how they affect communication. Observers were to look at all classroom interaction, take extensive notes during the observations, and later add to and organize these notes. From these notes, they were to extract patterns and, from these patterns, suggest questions for further study.

### Subjects and setting:

#### Classroom A

The subjects of this study were all participants in one of two classrooms. In Classroom A, there were two teachers, an aide and thirty-two students. Teacher A1 was an elementary teacher with TESOL<sup>2</sup> experience. She had taught elementary school for many years, including reading and content area subjects. Her job was to acculturate students to "the elementary school experience". Teacher A2 had a master's degree in Romance languages, had taught French and was recruited to teach ESOL, which she had done for

nine years. Her job was to teach language skills. The aide was shared by several classrooms; one of her responsibilities was to supervise recess.

Classroom A had thirty-two first-, second- and third-grade students. They were pulled out of<sup>3</sup> five or six regular classes during the morning and returned to those mainstream classes after lunch. All students were from Southeast Asian countries. The length of residence in the United States varied, as did the native languages (Khmer, Chinese, Lao and Vietnamese) and levels of English language proficiency. All students but one were learning pre-reading skills; one who was just beginning to read received special help in reading. While the students had been in school for five weeks at the time of the observation, they had attended this half-day ESOL class for only two weeks.

Classroom A was housed in one of two wooden buildings set apart from the main school complex. An asphalt playground separated the two buildings and a tall chain-link fence surrounded the complex. Graffiti covered the brick-red walls. The playground equipment consisted of two basketball "hoops" made of milk crates with the bottoms broken out. The interior of the building was cluttered but brightly decorated. The classroom interior was crowded, with barely enough room for the children to get in and out of their desks. The decor was lively: bookshelves and holiday decorations adorned the blackboard. There were two round tables and a desk on the other side of the bookcase-divider; here another part of the class would meet later in the year. At that time, the two classes would be conducted simultaneously.

Classroom A seemed to be totally teacher-fronted. On the day when the observers were present, the teachers initiated the interaction, the students responded (or failed to respond as all students occasionally do), and teachers most often gave some feedback. No pair or small group work was observed here. Class size and space limitations must be seen as major contributing factors in the choice of activities and participation patterns.

### Classroom B

At the time of observation Classroom B contained one teacher and twenty-eight students. The teachers told the observers that university students and a reading tutor also work with the class or with individual students. Teacher B was trained not only as an ESOL teacher, but also as an elementary teacher. She had worked at the school for twelve years and had seen the ethnic make-up of classes change considerably over the years. She was aware of community norms and tensions and was very attuned to the needs of all her students. She was able to provide information about the school in general. She informed the observers that the whole elementary/junior high school complex is run by one principal whom she depicted as strict, dedicated and respected. Sufficient funds are available for the school's work with ESOL students through a local project that coordinates some thirty programs.

The students of Classroom B were Black Americans and Asians. While they were all second and third graders, there was a greater span in ages than normally found in those grades because some students had been held back. As in Classroom A, there was a range of language proficiency levels for both native and non-native speakers of English. Some students were pulled out for ESOL classes in the afternoons; others were pulled out for reading help. Students in this class had at least minimal reading skills. Class spirit was evident: students showed pride in a resident artist (see reference to "portrait" below) and obvious empathy for a fellow student who was upset over having lost a valuable piece of jewelry, a chain, because he clearly would be punished at home for losing it.

Classroom B was housed in the main school complex, a group of large stone buildings a block away from the wooden structures. Again, the playground was asphalt, and there was no playground equipment. The interior hallways were neat and conservatively decorated. The classroom was not as crowded as Classroom A. Students were seated by twos, boys in one row and girls in another. One wall was dedicated to visitors and

displayed a full-length portrait and a story about one tutor, a drawing and story about another, and even a listing on the blackboard of the names of the day's four observers and a welcome to them.

In Classroom B, a variety of teaching methods was used. Sometimes the class was teacher-fronted with an initiation-response-feedback pattern similar to that of Classroom A. At other times during the teacher-fronting, the students were asked to initiate questions. Students were also permitted to work in pairs.

### Participation of observers

Teachers' methods and the physical setting of each classroom contributed to differences in observers' methods. In the case of Classroom A, the observers had to sit "apart" from the students. There were no aisles between desks, and there was no room between the last students' desks and the bookcase-divider at the back, so the observers sat to the side in the walkway between the door and the rear of the classroom. While the space between the observers and the students was barely larger than in Classroom B, the psychological distance seemed much greater. The observers were not introduced to the students and were not asked to participate in class activities, so their status in Classroom A was that of "observer" only.

In Classroom B, observers were introduced to the students and asked to choose a "partner" with whom they would sit. (Students also had student partners with whom they sat.) There was room between rows for observers to sit. Observers were asked to participate in each class activity: they answered questions during interviews, checked students' progress in phonics seat work and helped with a spelling bee. The status of the observers in Classroom B was that of "participant observer".

Teachers did not accompany students to recess, but the visiting observers watched and/or participated informally. Children played games, chattering in whatever language was appropriate, usually not English. Several boys from Classroom A approached an

observer during recess and asked her to mediate a dispute. To do this they spoke English, easily conveying their point.

### **Focus on Linguistic Patterns**

**Sandra K. Gill**

Data collection procedures varied according to teaching styles. No tape recordings were made. As an observer in Classroom A, I collected handwritten data as the lesson proceeded, including notes on classroom setting and teachers' nonverbal actions and verbal asides, as well as teacher and student linguistic patterns in formal classroom discourse. Notes on teacher background, school setting, classroom set-up and recess activities were made after the observations. As a participant-observer in Classroom B, I collected very little data as the lesson progressed and made almost all notes by recall at a later time. For that reason, there is little data on linguistic patterns in Classroom B. I believe this qualification to be important because of the unreliability of recall data on syntactic and discourse patterns.

#### Linguistic patterns

Two registers are of interest to the present study: "teacher talk" and "foreigner talk." A "register" is a particular way people speak in a particular situation. Heath (1978) characterizes "teacher talk" as a register teachers use in a classroom situation and points out the following characteristics, among others: exaggerated intonation, shorter sentences, directives in the form of questions, frequent use of wh-questions, predominant three-part discourse structure and frequent references to time and space. In her work on "foreigner talk" Hatch mentions the following ways native speakers make it easier for learners to take part in conversations: "They slow down, articulate more clearly, use contrastive stress, check for comprehension in a variety of ways, fill in linguistic gaps for

the learner by predicting what he meant to say, etc." (Hatch 1975 in Hatch 1978:435n). There is a significant overlap between "teacher talk" and "foreigner talk".

Characteristics of questions from both registers may be relevant to questions found in my data. Heath remarks that "teachers working with children they believe to be deficient in language skills give cues about questions that will be asked in the future. These cues point out the slots and fillers students must use to provide correct answers...[they] clarify the linguistic structure of the speech and thus help in comprehension and acquisition of language control" (Heath 1978:4). For example:

Tomorrow will be a color day. Our special color will be red.

When they ask second language learners questions, native speakers often "shift down" the syntax difficulty of their questions. According to Hatch (1978) they do this by rephrasing a question that they have already asked in one of the following ways:

1. WH-Q repaired as YES-NO Q:  
How is your team? Is your team very good?...
2. WH-Q repaired as an OR CHOICE Q:  
No, how does it go, do they play like this or like this?...
3. Q + Answer by Teacher:  
What else is good over there? The Haunted House?

The above patterns represent restructurings in response to requests for clarification.

In sets of questions found in my data, similar constructions appear. Unlike questions that require rephrasing after receiving no student reply or after requests for clarification, these questions seemed to follow one another immediately, i.e., there was no apparent wait time<sup>4</sup>. There seemed to be no intention on the teachers' part to require or expect answers to the first question, but rather to use the first question as a preface to the second. The following questions appeared in the data from Classroom A:



1. WII-question followed by YES/NO question:
  - What color cape does a witch wear? White? (A1)<sup>5</sup>
  - Where are the witches going? Do you know? (A1)
  - What is she writing with? Is it a red crayon? (A2)
  - What color is the teacher's desk? Is it blue? (A2)
2. WH-question followed by OR CHOICE (or LIST) question:
  - How does your voice go? Down to the floor? Or up to the moon? (A1)
  - What is the little girl doing? Is she sitting at a table or a desk? (A2)
  - When do they come around? What special time of year? (A1)
  - Who can read the paper? Who can read what it says?  
[pause] What kind of letter is that at the beginning? (A1)
3. Question + Answer from Teacher:

[This pattern did not occur. The cue in yes/no questions was always the wrong choice. Note: See witch cape example in #1: "White?"]

While this multiple question-and-answer pattern was not the only one found in my data for Classroom A, it was common, and its presence invited comment. A single question-and-answer pattern occurred in a number of cases, but primarily during a sentence pattern drill:

T: Where are we?                      SS: We are in the classroom.  
T: Where are you?                     S: I am in the classroom.  
T: Where are the children?        SS: They are in the classroom.

Teacher's aside: "We're conjugating a verb, but you can't do that [conjugating] with children."

While this last pattern is peculiar to ESL and foreign language classrooms and would be unlikely to occur in a regular elementary school classroom, I felt that the earlier multiple-question pattern could be compared to question patterns in Classroom B.

The only questions recorded from Classroom B<sup>6</sup> were known information (i.e., display) questions and unknown information, yes-no questions:

T: Does "sisters" start with the same sound as Sarah?

SS: Yes.

T: What is that sound?

SS: "Sssss"

T: What is the next one?

SS: A shell.

T: What sound does it start with?

SS: "Shhhh"

T Do you think today is a beautiful one? [pause]<sup>7</sup>

Do you?

[ Answer not recorded]

Multiple questions, as noted in Classroom A, were not found in Classroom B; neither were there the type of restructured questions described by Hatch. In Classroom A, no student initiated a question, but in Classroom B, students initiated questions as part of an interview exercise. First, questions were directed to their student partners, and then to the observers. The topics of the questions were interesting ( all personal, including one on the observers' ages) and, like their two-part sequence (elicitation-response), the topics were unusual to a classroom setting, i.e., more conversational in nature.

#### Discussion and hypotheses

When comparing the two classroom atmospheres, the sense of "apart-ness" in one and "partnership" in the other cannot be ignored. "Apartness" could be seen in Classroom A in the following features: Classroom A was physically separated from the main school, its students were pulled out of regular elementary school classes to attend the ESOL class, the teacher always stood in front of the class, the observers sat apart from the students, and students took only a passive role in class activities. "Partnership" in Classroom B was demonstrated as follows: Classroom B was in the main school, its students were both English and non-English speaking, the teacher sometimes assumed an "equal" status by becoming a responder, students called the teacher by her first name, as she, of course, did them, and students had student partners and observers had partners.

It is very hard to pinpoint the relationship between this sense of "apart-ness" and "partnership" on the one hand, and the differences in linguistic patterns on the other. There may be no direct relationship, yet there may be some link. Perhaps the more formal linguistic structures in Classroom A grew out of a sense of "strangeness" because the class was new. Maybe the conversation-like interaction in Classroom B resulted from the sense of equality that pervaded that classroom. There are too many variables, such as classroom overcrowding as a factor in the degree of teacher-frontedness or the presence of one teacher and two aides in one classroom. In a more extensive ethnography, one could perhaps observe one of the teachers from Classroom A in a more ideal setting. Alternatively, one could observe Teacher B teaching pre-reading skills to a pull-out ESOL class. Study of the same grade level would also yield more consistent results. Another factor not considered here is the nature of methods used to teach pre-reading skills to a mainstream first grade as compared to those used for ESOL in Classroom A. The linguistic patterns observed here in Classroom A may not be unusual at this grade and achievement level. Heath (1978) says that "teacher talk" differs from one grade level to another, that "teacher talk" used in early grades is perceived as "talking down" when used with older students.

An hypothesis I find most interesting, while I do not see it as directly related to the apartness of Classroom A, is whether this multiple-question pattern may be beneficial to language acquisition. First, it supplies the cues mentioned by Heath (see above). These cues should help the second language learner focus on the topic of the question. Second, it serves to clarify the first question through the second question. Finally, the first question supplies a model wh- question. If the second question is at the student's current level of competence, then the first question may well be at an  $i + 1^8$  level (Krashen 1982). If input is being supplied by a native speaker at the  $i + 1$  level, students will have language available in an appropriate context for acquisition, according to Krashen's Input Hypothesis. So, what might in a regular elementary school classroom appear to be

negative--because there is no wait time between two questions and because the teacher, by asking more questions, is holding the floor for longer periods of time--may in fact be beneficial in the ESOL classroom.

### **Yukiko Kono: Phonology and Switching**

#### Phonology and spelling

##### Variation and voiceless "th"

The children in Classroom B, the mainstream classroom, practiced pronunciation of "ch" [č], "sh" [š], "th" [θ] and "wh" [ʍ] as part of that day's activities. When repeating after the teacher in unison, the children could pronounce [č], [š] and [ʍ] as the teacher did, but some variations of [θ] were heard. Some children made sounds like [t], others [θ], and still others something in between.

Labov (1970) describes the voiceless [θ] as "one of the most general and simple sociolinguistic markers in English". The fricative [θ] is universally the most prestigious, while affricate and stop variants such as [tθ] and [t] are stigmatized. In considering the native English-speaking children who had difficulty with these sounds, we might propose that since most of the children belong to socioeconomically less prestigious groups, they may have acquired a non-standard pronunciation of [θ].

There may be another factor causing difficulty, especially for the Asian children. When practicing the pronunciation of "thumb", a Cambodian boy named "Vuth" said, in a loud voice, "tum". While his name is spelled with "th", his name should be pronounced as [vut]. I saw several other names of Asian boys and girls containing "th" pronounced as [t]. It is possible that those children did not notice that the "th" in English and the one in their native language (when written in the Roman alphabet) are in fact differently pronounced. Therefore, they may have transferred the correlation between spelling and

pronunciation into English. Transfer from Black English Vernacular phonological variants of [θ] could also be proposed as a cause of the difficulties Black children had with the classroom exercise.

#### Misspelling and pronunciation

After practicing the pronunciation of these sounds, the children in Classroom B were assigned to do some exercises in their workbooks. In these exercises they were required to write words with one of four sounds which corresponded to pictures of objects such as "chick", "sheep", "that" and "whip". A Black child asked me to pronounce the name of the objects while he tried to spell out the corresponding words. However, he almost always misspelled the words. He tended to spell [č] as "th", [š] as "ch" and [θ] as "sh". Although this may be because of my non-native pronunciation (a couple of other children, however, spelled the words correctly after I read them), it is also possible that this child became confused because his dialect has an alternate pronunciation of the sounds I was pronouncing. For instance, if his pronunciation of the word "ship" were very close to the standard pronunciation of "chip", he might not have been able to distinguish one from the other aurally for purposes of spelling.

Trudgill (1983) contends that speakers of non-standard, and, I might add, non-native, varieties face severe difficulties in learning to read and write, because the language they speak is far different from the standard, written variety. This also applies to the correlation between spelling and pronunciation. For example, a child speaking a non-standard variety might have difficulty learning to spell "pen" and "pin" correctly if he perceives the two words as homonyms. The Black child in Classroom B, too, may have been struggling with the difference between his dialect and the school standard during the spelling task.

### Children's speech in formal classroom discourse

The children's utterances were controlled by the teachers in both classes. There were neither voluntary contributions given nor questions posed by any of the pupils. Almost all their speech was in response to questions asked by the teacher (See sample 1-- for all samples see Appendix). One exception occurred in Classroom A (sample 2), when a boy made a pun on another pupil's answer to the preceding question, and the whole class started laughing. This was followed by an act of "punishment" from the teacher, who turned off the lights and threatened to leave the students in the dark classroom until order was reestablished.

Generally, children's replies were shorter and more strongly controlled by the teacher in Classroom A (sample 3), probably because: (1) the pupils' level of English proficiency was generally lower in the ESOL class than in the mainstream class, and (2) most second graders should have higher verbal proficiency than first graders.

In Classroom A one of the teachers also exerted control over the form of student replies. Teacher A2 in this class often required "complete answers" (sample 4). To answer the question, "What color is the crayon?", the pupil was told to answer, "It's green.", instead of simply saying, "green". It seems that the teacher wanted to teach the pattern of a complete sentence as part of the ESOL lesson.

It is not likely that she thought the elliptical answer "green" was an "illogical or badly-formed answer", as Bereiter (1966, cited and criticized by Labov 1969) said when he studied "culturally and linguistically deprived" Black children's nonstandard English. (According to Bereiter's analysis, the elliptical "in the tree" is an illogical answer to the question, "Where is the squirrel?", even though every speaker of standard dialect would actually answer in the shorter form.)

In daily interaction outside the classroom, however, the children would probably hear elliptical answers far more often than complete answers. If a teacher adhered to the

prescriptively taught "correct" forms too much, the children would be faced with a discrepancy between the language taught at school and that which is naturally acquired outside school. This could cause confusion. Therefore, it seems desirable for a teacher to accept the child's reply if it is contextually correct, and then to explain the difference between the child's answer and the teacher's expectation, rather than simply correcting it without explanation.

### Code-switching

#### Black Vernacular English and Standard English

In Classroom B, some Black children used Black Vernacular English when they were whispering and chatting among themselves, while they seemed to attempt a slightly more standard variety when they spoke to me. Since they were not heard spontaneously speaking to the teacher, it was not possible to analyze their code-switching patterns in detail. Nevertheless, I believe they would not have talked to the teacher as they did in their peer group, e.g., "Hey, man! Look a' tha' kid!". Interestingly, when they spoke to their non-native English speaking classmates, they chose Black Vernacular English.

When talking with peers from the same language background, Asian children used their native languages in both Classroom A and B. When talking to their Black peers, they used English (Classroom B). In Classroom B, however, they talked in their native language, even with their Black peers nearby, when exclusively addressing other children of the same ethnic origin.

When talking to (and responding to) the teachers and the observers, the children made every effort to use English. In Classroom B, a Cambodian boy could tell the teacher and observers in English about how he lost a necklace and how it was very important to him. On the playground, another Asian boy asked us in English to settle a dispute over a ball.

When playing among themselves, some Asian children used their native language and others used English. There are a few possible explanations for their use of English. First, because the Asian children came from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, English would be their *lingua franca*. Second, the playground was a place where they could playfully practice their English in a non-instructional context; for example, I observed a group of Cambodian girls playing a counting game in English.

### Discussion

The children, both Asian and Black American, seemed to switch from one language or dialect to another according to their interlocutors. Valdes (1982), in her study on code-switching among Spanish-English bilinguals, writes that "switching patterns seem to be influenced by the particular proficiency of the other speakers and their preference for one or the other of the two languages or for a specific blend of the two codes". Though the Asian children I observed were not yet fully bilingual, they were able to switch codes in order to communicate with everyone as successfully as possible, i.e., to accommodate to their addressees.

In addition to interlocutors, there are many other sociolinguistic variables correlated with code-switching, such as activity, topic, discourse type and setting (Zentella 1982). In Zentella's study on Puerto Rican children, Juan, who was less proficient in both English and Spanish, was recorded experimenting with several English sounds and words when playing dominoes with two Puerto Rican girls. In the same research article, domain effect is cited as an obvious explanation of the language selection of Nora, one of the girls playing the game. It is possible to apply these findings and analyses to the group of Cambodian girls who were playing their game in English. They may have been motivated enough to experiment in English even among their ethnic group. Or they may have learned that game in English, probably from English-speaking peers in some school-related context where English predominated. Another interpretation



is that, like Nora in Zentella's study, they had just learned to count in English and were applying that new knowledge to the game.

Although the total time for observation was very limited (approximately five hours), preliminary findings on the phonology and non-native and non-standard varieties of English, teacher control over classroom discourse and children's code-switching patterns merit further investigation. These findings demonstrate only a few of the many problems involved in teaching a linguistically mixed group of children in the same classroom. Some of the sociolinguistic problems observed would be difficult to solve, as each reflects sometimes conflicting sociocultural values. Even such brief visits to school settings point out the need for more sociolinguistic research in the classroom setting.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a combination of two papers, prepared individually by each of the authors, for Dr. Nancy Hornberger's "Sociolinguistics in Education" class.

<sup>2</sup> TESOL=Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

<sup>3</sup> The process of taking students out of their regular classrooms and placing them in specialized classes for instruction in ESOL, reading or other subjects is referred to as a "pull-out" program.

<sup>4</sup> In studies on "wait time" (Rowe 1974, in White and Lightbown 1984; Pearson 1980; and Long et al. 1984), researchers found that, on the average, teachers waited less than two seconds for students to reply to their questions. Although pauses were not measured for this data, by experience with other data collection where pauses were measured, I would say that the pauses were about half a second to one second in length, as little as found between sentences in normal discourse.

<sup>5</sup> When necessary for clarity, sentences are coded as to teacher. For example, (A1) is the Teacher A1, or the first teacher in Classroom A, and so on.

<sup>6</sup> Again, it was difficult to collect linguistic data from Classroom B (see above). It may be that there were fewer questions asked in Classroom B than in Classroom A, but it was not possible to verify this. In part, data collection in Classroom B was determined by the observer's focus.

<sup>7</sup> This pause was not timed, but perceived as long enough for a reply. Notice, also, that the second question here is not a restructuring question but a restatement.

<sup>8</sup> The *i+1* level of language input, according to Krashen, is one level above the student's present stage of interlanguage development. The exposure to *i+1* input, which challenges the learner to move past his present level, is claimed to be a causal variable in language acquisition.

## Appendix

### Sample 1: (Class A)

T: Where are we ?

Ss: XXX

T: We're sorry?

SA: At school.

T: At school. But are we in the playground?

T: Are we outside?

Ss: No.

T: Where are we?

Ss: XXX

T: We are in the school, aren't we?

SB: In the XXX.

T: In the ---CLASSROOM  
Everybody say, WE ARE IN  
THE CLASSROOM. Again.

Ss: WE ARE IN THE CLASSROOM.

Ss: WE ARE IN THE CLASSROOM.

### Sample 2: (Class A)

T: What do you use to write on the blackboard?

SA: On XXX.

T: A piece of chalk. Writing with chalk.

Ss: Chalk. Chalk. Chalk.  
Cho-colate! (laughter)

T: Here is another teacher.  
Who are having the XXX!  
What are you doing on the floor?  
(pause--about 10 seconds)  
OK. I'm leaving. (turns off light)  
You want to stay in the dark till lunch time?

Ss: (laughter) Chocolate. Chocolate.

Ss: Na---w. No. No.

T: Then be quiet.

### Sample 3: (Class B)

T: We're gonna write a story.  
How can we start, A?

SA: We have four visitors---

T: Good. (writes, "We have four visitors from University of Pennsylvania")  
B?

SB: They are tutors.

**T: No, not tutors. They are observing.**

**Sample 4: (Class A)**

**T: Who can tell me what color is the crayon? A?**

**SA: Green?**

**T: Say, "It's green."**

**SA: It's green.**

**T: What color is the crayon, B?**

**SB: Green.**

**T: Say, "It's green."**

**Ss: It's green.**

**T: It's green.**

**Ss: It's green.**

**Note: T: Teacher**

**Ss: More than one child simultaneously**

**SA & SB: One child at a time (usually nominated by the teacher)**

**XXX: Unclear recording (untranscribable)**

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