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Ambidexterity, identity and awareness: Negotiating the discourses of grammar teaching for pre-service teachers

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Background

Understanding how teachers construct, and in turn are constructed by, a subject area provides insight into one of the many ways in which teachers' work interacts with their teacher identity. The subject area of grammar is considered to be particularly "ripe" for investigation given the controversy, division and debate that accompany approaches to classroom teaching of grammar. In many English speaking contexts, grammar teaching has been the site of what could best be termed ideological struggle between different perspectives of what grammar "is", "does" and "means". In the midst of these complex debates over purpose, practice and policy, the voice and experience of the teacher can easily be "lost". As an area of teaching that has been subject to a number of significant changes in recent years, it is often left up to the teacher to negotiate the discourses involved in grammar education, especially in relation to the interpretation of historically variable curricula. The research project seeks to uncover and to explore the pre-service teachers' voice, as it is believed that it is the teacher who is of fundamental significance to the effectiveness of a grammar teaching situation.

Research Questions

The guiding research question for this project seeks to explore the processes by which pre-service teachers construct their identities as teachers in relation to teaching grammar. This discussion examines the intersection between teacher identity and the discourses of grammar teaching from the perspective of a cohort of pre-service primary and early childhood teachers. The research question explores how pre-service teachers negotiate the discourses of grammar teaching, with a particular focus on the development of their identities as pre-service teachers.

Methods

The research project drew upon qualitative and data from a cohort of one hundred and fourteen pre-service teachers. The qualitative data set comprised the responses of pre-service teachers to a set of electronic bulletin board questions (N=114). Analysis of the bulletin board data incorporated a grounded theory coding and categorisation process, thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis.

The qualitative data gathered from the pre-service teachers was gathered from the posting of two bulletin board responses by the students. The students were asked to respond in two phases. Each phase posed a set of guiding questions for the construction of the bulletin board responses. The pre-service teachers' personal views, opinions, attitudes and beliefs were valued and encouraged as a response to the guiding discussion topics. The purpose of the bulletin board was to gather candid responses from the pre-service teachers and they are encouraged to view the bulletin board as a forum for open discussion. The bulletin board responses were copied from the on-line bulletin board and saved as an electronic text file. The responses of the students who had indicated that they did not wish to take part in the study were removed from the master file. The names of the remaining students were subsequently removed from the postings so that each bulletin board response was not identifiable. The bulletin board responses that comprised the data set for the research project were anonymous.

Frame

The data gathered from the bulletin board responses were analysed using two analytical approaches: constant comparative coding processes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin,

1990) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995; Meyer, 2001; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, Upton 2005; Van Dijk, 2001). The hybrid approach of grounded theory and critical discourse analysis was appropriate for the study as the construction of the research project did not employ a "pure" grounded theory approach in the adoption of the entire process. Rather, the elements of the grounded theory approach that were of benefit to the analytical aims of the project included the detailed coding processes of initial coding, theoretical coding which lead to the development of theory. The move from theoretical coding to theory involved critical discourse analysis as a further filter - this provided for the consideration of the intersection of language and society as sites for the production of discourses. The combination of grounded theory coding and critical discourse analysis allowed for the identification of discourse relations created by and through the ideologically and politically saturated activities of teaching and learning.

Research findings

Analysis of the bulletin board responses yielded three core categories from the theoretical coding process - "grammatical ambidexterity", "identity capital" and "pedagogical awareness". Each category provides a means of understanding the means by which pre-service teachers negotiate their identity in relation to the teaching of grammar. Pedagogical awareness as a core category is linked to the category of "reflection and transformation". Pedagogical awareness is linked to the process of reflection in the activity of teaching. Pedagogical awareness encompasses the process by which the beliefs of the pre-service teachers are present in the decision making involved with teaching. Identity capital captured the connections made by the pre-service teachers between their awareness of the process of identity formation and the social, political and cultural frameworks in which they form their identities. The term "identity capital" refers to the way in which "individuals 'invest' in who they are" (Cote, 1996, p. 425). Of the three categories, "grammatical ambidexterity" provides a possible solution for pre-service teachers grappling with the demands of grammar education. Through reconceptualising what grammar "is" and moving away from a prescriptive framework there is potential for the pre-service teachers to develop a coherent identity. By measuring their own grammatical capacity against a prescriptive discourse, they are being placed in a deficit position. In moving away from prescriptivism and towards descriptive grammar, they are engaging in discourses that include a consideration of how grammar and its social function work to produce language in use.