Multilingualism across contexts: Mediating the semiotic resources of plurilingual learners

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Current interest in plurilingualism, translanguaging and/or ecological models of multilingual practice is driven not by a desire to measure, quantify or delineate an individual’s linguistic repertoire, but by interest in the ways in which individuals draw on semiotic resources, what Matthiessen (2009) has described as their "personalized meaning potential," to navigate within and across multiple social contexts. However such work often presumes language users have a conscious and/or tacit understanding of the potential of their linguistic repertoire and are able to strategically use these resources to further personal interests and goals. These assumptions risk privileging students whose semiotic practices closely align with dominant educational discourses and/or those whose already well-developed metalinguistic awareness affords social and academic benefits. Such work leaves unaddressed the pressing educational challenge of developing plurilingual practices that benefit the broad range of diversities represented in contemporary classrooms.

Drawing on longitudinal research in highly diverse multilingual classrooms, this paper examines the complex semiotic work of recontextualizing quotidian or everyday knowledge, including knowledge in and of home languages, and the mediational practices which supported students in these efforts. Using examples from multiple grade levels and socioeconomic contexts, I will illustrate how the teachers’ concept of student voice and expectations that students would draw on resources from beyond the classroom played a crucial role in developing students’ ability to recognize their existing semiotic resources’ value. In each case, teachers privileged analytical practices and personal meanings, explicitly rejected the idea of an answer, and positioned curricular knowledge as a subset of available evidence. Detailed analysis of classroom discourse, student texts and teachers’ reflections demonstrate how these practices created shared responsibility for identifying relevant meanings, while simultaneously fostering students’ awareness of the strategic value of their semiotic repertoires. I close with two propositions regarding conditions for successful recontextualization and their pedagogic implications.

Keywords: recontextualization, multimodality, multilingualism.