Invisible Battles: Divergent Conceptions of Student-Centered Talk

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Abstract: Student-centered talk (SCT) can support students' literacy achievement as well as their perspective taking and identity development; yet little is known about the ways in which teachers' and students' beliefs, values, and understandings of the purposes of SCT intersect or diverge. Indeed, these educator ideologies play a significant role in the implementation of classroom discourse practices, while learner ideologies contribute to the ways in which students take up those practices. In this paper, we examine learner and educator ideologies surrounding the role of SCT in learning and engaging in the middle-grades classroom. Drawing on teacher interviews and student focus groups, the present study offers a framework for examining the ways in which educator and learner ideologies surrounding student-centered talk align or misalign. Findings highlight significant divergence in the ways that students and teachers conceptualize the role of student-centered talk in the classroom.

Keywords: student-centered talk, conversation, ideology, pedagogy, teacher practice

Purpose

Student-centered talk (SCT) plays a profound role in supporting learners' reading achievement (Murphy, Wilkinson, & Soter, 2011; Nystrand, 2006), awareness of various perspectives (Almasi, 1995; McKeown, Beck, & Sandora, 1996), academic language skills (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Nagy, Townsend, Lesaux, & Schmitt, 2012), and learner agency (Santori & Belfatti, 2016). Yet consistently implementing classroom discussions that meaningfully support learning is a dauntingly complex task, as teachers must balance varying student goals, different interactional styles, and the need to address a breadth of content in limited time. The present study seeks to explore alignment and misalignment in middle-grade educators' and students' beliefs, values, and knowledge surrounding SCT, which influence how classroom talk is enacted by educators and taken up by learners. In doing so, we address the call to improve education by examining learning and language from the perspective of both teachers and learners simultaneously. Through this investigation, we seek to answer the question: *In what meaningful ways do educator and student ideologies surrounding student-centered talk practices intersect or diverge?*

Theoretical framework

Student-centered talk

Classroom ecologies are shaped neither entirely by students nor teachers, but by the ideological negotiation that structures the conceptual space between the two (Song, Hannafin, & Hill, 2007). In such a space, the beliefs, values, and knowledge—or ideologies— of both teachers and students create the conditions for learning. For educators, leveraging the interaction of such a wide array of ideologies to support meaningful learning signifies a complex and nuanced task (Hofer, 2001). Nowhere is this negotiation more apparent than during SCT. We theorize *student-centered talk* as classroom discussions that center learners in engaging with each other and/or educators to grapple with abstract content and ideas that support critical thinking. In contrast to traditional teacher-dominated initiate-response-evaluate discourse structures, SCT is premised on students working collaboratively with each other and/or educators to address open-ended questions that require analysis, evaluation, and synthesis (Murphy et al., 2011). We use the term *student-centered talk,* as opposed to more commonly used terms for classroom conversations, to distinguish these particular discussions as foregrounding student thought and agency.

The importance of ideological study

In the present work, we focus on examining the beliefs, values, and knowledge underlying participation in SCT. We use the term *ideologies* to encompass the enormity of the system of beliefs, values, and understandings that surround discourse practices within the context of the classroom, a complex sociopolitical landscape (Bacon, 2018). Rooted deeply in cultural practices, systems of conversational practice are inherently open to diverse interpretations, even among individuals who share cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Thus, discourse practices in the classroom represent particularly rich spaces for examining diverse ideologies.

The importance of research focused on teacher ideologies is linked with the central role that these systems of belief play in how learning activities are structured in the classroom (Poulson, Avramidis, Fox, Medwell, & Wray, 2001). However, a focus on student ideologies is equally important given that they determine how those activities are viewed and taken up (Tsai, 1999). Difficulties can arise when students and teachers hold different conceptions regarding what the learning process should look like or what it is aiming to achieve (Green, 1993; McCargar, 1993). Without a shared set of understandings regarding the purposes of classroom practices, teachers and students can end up in "invisible battles," with each seeking to accomplish divergent, sometimes incompatible, goals.

While we believe that a rich array of ideas and linguistic processes are essential to meaningful engagement in academic conversation, we also subscribe to the belief, espoused by Song, Hannafin, and Hill (2007) that learning occurs most effectively when student and educator beliefs about learning practices are reconciled. We conceptualize r*econciliation* as entailing a process by which students and teachers reach accord regarding the purpose of certain processes or understandings. According to Song, Hannafin, and Hill (2007), "Understanding the correspondence between underlying beliefs and practices empowers instructors and students…Instructors can help students to understand the value assigned to various course units, activities, and requirements and encourage students to express their beliefs to heighten awareness of potential misalignments from the outset" (p. 44). In reconciling ideologies surrounding the purpose of SCT, both educators and learners are empowered to achieve their goals for SCT and create a space where divergent ideas are welcomed within the context of a shared set of valued practices.

Methods

This study took place within the context of a larger study exploring language ideologies and academic language learning in the linguistically-diverse middle-grades classroom. As cited on the district's website, during the 2018-2019 school year, the school enrolled 795 students, 55% of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and 42% of whom are designated English Learners. The school is not only linguistically diverse, but also ethnically diverse, with a population comprised of 62% Hispanic students, 16% Black students, 11% White students, and 11% Asian students.

Participants were six educators teaching grades 5-8 and 82 of their students at a public middle school in a city in the Southeastern United States. Five of the teachers taught both a mainstream content area subject and a language support class for Emergent Bilinguals (EBs) all of whom were designated as English Learners, while the sixth served primarily in a support role for mainstream educators teaching EBs while also teaching a language support class. Educators completed an interview regarding their language ideologies, and students participated in focus groups. The 82 students who participated in focus groups in this study were all participants in the school's language support program and represented a significant percentage of the six classes from which they were selected. Students were a convenience sample based on teacher participation in the study and parent or guardian consent. In order to alleviate concerns about terminology in speaking with students about SCT, focus group facilitators used synonyms, examples, and directed questioning as means of prompting students to reflect on talk in their classrooms.

Data sources

Educator interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting during spring 2019. Questions were written to reflect current research regarding language ideologies (Martínez, Hikida, & Durán, 2015; Palmer, 2011). Student focus groups were comprised of five to six students interviewed simultaneously; 14 focus groups were conducted over two days in spring 2019. All audio was transcribed using Rev.com transcription services.

Data analysis

The research team used a framework of inductive thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012) in coding interview and focus group transcripts. In doing so, the team hoped to "[present] the stories and experiences voiced by study participants as accurately and comprehensively as possible" (Guest et al., 2012, p. 15–16). The research team was comprised of three former middle grade educators. All identified as female and white, and two identified as bilingual.

The first author completed initial coding by identifying statements pertinent to the research question. These codes were collapsed into overarching categories, in consult with the rest of the research team. Two team members then individually double coded 20% of relevant transcript excerpts and subsequently met to reach consensus. Then, the primary investigator worked with the team to recode the entirety of the relevant transcript excerpts with the refined category definitions, in order to ensure consistency and seek out disconfirming cases. Frequency counts were obtained in terms of instances of each code.

Findings

The authors identified seven key themes related to purposes of SCT across both focus groups and interviews. These themes were sorted into two overarching categories: those pertaining to individual learning outcomes (see Table 1) and those pertaining to engagement in group processes (see Table 2).

Table 1: Codes pertaining to individual learning outcomes

SCT as…	Sample Coded Quotes
an opportunity to practice certain social norms	T: "They need to learn when it's appropriate for them to speak and when it's not their turn."
a means of supporting content learning	T: "It's also always scaffolding either a whole class discussion leader, or a writing activity, or the next question about the text."
a chance for students to deepen and elaborate on ideas	S: "Like a serious conversation, really going into deep what is the question about and what we're talking about."
a time for students to develop their English skills	S: "Speaking your English better."

Although the theme of "SCT as an opportunity to practice certain social norms" conceivably could have been included under the overarching category of "engagement in group processes," statements coded under this theme primarily centered on students *acquiring* particular social norms. This observation resulted in the decision to place this theme within the individual learning outcomes category.

Table 2: Codes pertaining to engagement in group processes

SCT as…	Sample Coded Quotes
an opportunity to listen to and interact with peers	T: "To me, to make it look successful would be having the kids actually talking and listening to one another."
an activity where most speak	T: "Whole group though, you always have the ones that are so reluctant they will never speak up…they are more successful with small group."
positioning students as experts and agents	S: "I thought something and when I talked to Jocelyn...she talks about something else and we both share different ideas, so we learn more."

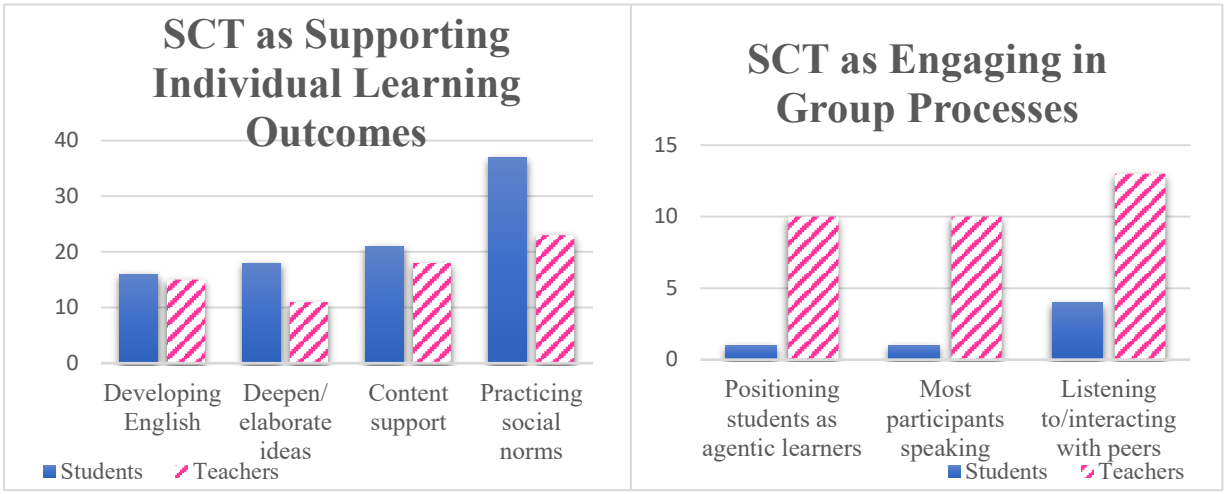
Students and teachers shared important points of convergence in their understanding of the purposes of SCT, primarily centered around students' individual learning outcomes. Both students and teachers expressed ideologies foregrounded in what students would gain individually as a result of participating in SCT practices (see Figure 1). However, an important point of divergence became apparent when examining the codes surrounding engagement in group processes; our six teacher participants collectively mentioned this form of engagement 33 times, yet our 82 student participants referenced "engagement in group processes" as an outcome of SCT a total of only six times across our interactions (see Figure 1).

Discussion

We recognize the limitations of this work. Working within a single school limits the generalizability of these findings, though we hope that readers will use their best judgment in determining their applicability to specific contexts. In addition, it is beyond the scope of this work to examine the ways in which the cultural backgrounds of the studied teachers, who were primarily white, may have interacted with the cultural backgrounds of students, who were primarily Latinx and multilingual. Finally, our positionality as white, female researchers from a major university may have affected the responses that teachers and students were willing to share.

However, despite these limitations, we believe there is value in attempting to understand the ways in which educator and student ideologies impact collaborative meaning-making. In this study, educators' ideologies surrounding the purpose of SCT in the classroom shared important points of convergence with students when considered in light of individual learning outcomes; both learners and educators valued SCT as supporting the development of a variety of skills and knowledge. However, students and teachers diverged on the question of whether engagement in group processes, in and of itself, represented a purpose for SCT. While teachers hoped that students would meaningfully engage with each other during SCT, students failed to recognize the value of this as a purpose of SCT. This ideological difference can result in frustration as students "fail" to achieve the goals set by teachers. Awareness of this divergence represents an important opportunity for teachers to engage in open-

ended dialogue with students to reconcile ideas surrounding the goals of SCT. We conceptualize this process of reconciliation as centering the goals of both teachers and students, ideally in a way that creates space for both students and teachers to achieve the purposes they have set for SCT.



(A) (B)

Figure 1. Instances coded of SCT as (A) supporting individual learning outcomes and (B) engagement in group processes.

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