

How policy shapes language teaching in an immigrant job training program

What this research was about and why it is important

In English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, teachers often explain the meanings of unfamiliar words to learners during instruction. This study investigated how educational policies impact teachers' vocabulary instruction in a community-based adult ESL program in the United States. The policy under consideration, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014, encourages publicly-funded ESL programs to offer job training concurrently with second language instruction. However job training programs, which emphasize the enactment of professional identities, present challenges for learners who are developing proficiency in English. This qualitative study explored how teachers in a nurse-aide job training ESL program interpreted the policy during classroom talk about word meanings. The study found that during vocabulary instruction, teachers narrowly defined words in the healthcare context, and avoided teaching other core meanings of words, as they are used in other contexts familiar to the students. Through this instruction, teachers simultaneously communicated desired models of healthcare professional identity. However, the emphasis on work-related identity production sometimes conflicted with the students' sense making in learning a second language.

What the researchers did

- More than 85 hours were spent observing in two different work-related ESL classrooms, and taking detailed fieldnotes which were later expanded into digital files.
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and administrators in the program.
- Program artifacts were collected including curricular materials, newsletters, public service fliers, and policy documents.
- All data sources were imported into NVivo 12, a qualitative analysis software program, and coded to identify emerging themes.
- More than 100 instances of word defining talk were identified, and eight representative instances were selected for further analysis.

What the researchers found

- As they taught new words, teachers were guided by policy imperatives, which emphasized that instruction occur "in context" for the purposes of advancing students' employment prospects.
- When unfamiliar words had multiple meanings, teachers often taught only meanings associated with healthcare or employment. The ways that teachers defined these words therefore simultaneously communicated desired models of professional identity to students.
- Instructional time often focused on teaching vocabulary common on multiple-choice tests, in order to prepare students for their final certification exam as nurse-aides. In their interpretations of new policy imperatives, program administrators emphasized the need for ESL teachers to provide instruction focused on testing preparations.

Things to consider

- During moments of encounters with unfamiliar words, teachers' attempts to reorient learners toward identity production may have interfered with the students' sense-making.
- When teachers restricted word defining talk to employment topics, students' imagined personhoods also were restricted into narrow roles as healthcare workers and caretakers. These restrictions provided fewer opportunities for students' multiple subjectivities (i.e. as parents, citizens) to emerge during instruction.
- As job training models become more common in community-based ESL programs, professional development could help teachers increase their awareness of the unique, situated meanings words carry in connection to students' lives and in workplace contexts.
- This study affirmed the importance to provide access to the core meanings of words to support students' language and identity development.
- Because words with multiple meanings can be ambiguous and more difficult for students to process, teachers can provide access to the core meanings of words, in order to make the situated meanings more memorable and accessible to students.

Material, data, open access article: N/A.

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