

# Questioning Identity: The Case of One Second-Language Learner

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*With the goal of illuminating how identity and cognition are in tension in classroom activity, we examine how one second-language learner answers questions in a mainstream second-grade classroom. To understand this learner's participation, we analyze two conflicting "language games." We find the second-language learner often is adept at "passing" as knowing, but that he achieves this identity-preserving expertise at the expense of an understanding of classroom lessons.*

Today is your first day of second grade in the United States and you do not speak a word of English. You are in rural Georgia, and neither your classmates nor your teacher speak a word of Spanish, your primary language. You have arrived in the middle of the year, and the other students are fully competent in the routines of the classroom. The desks are arranged in groups of four, coats and backpacks hung along the wall. Some students sit in a reading corner, paging through books. You are ushered to a seat. As the day proceeds you carefully mirror the actions of your classmates. And you smile a lot. The teacher smiles back at you. You seem to be doing well. And as the days go on, you will do better and better. You will know when to go to the door, when to raise your hand (so as *not* to be called on), when to smile, when to stand and sit, when to sharpen your pencil, when to go to the restroom, and what to bring for lunch. You are learning how to be a student in this classroom, and you will polish these routines for years. You will learn them so well that you will not need to learn other important elements of student life—you will not learn how to read in English. You will not learn how to write. And gradually, you will not care about learning these things anymore. You will drop out.

This scenario is extrapolated from observations I (Betsy Rymes) made in my first 18 months as a researcher in rural Georgia. It is not strictly empirical. It is a narrative based on my observations and the stories of several second-language learners, as well as my worries that have grown out of these observations and recording of interaction. This perspective and subsequent analysis also developed over a summer spent

reviewing, transcribing, and discussing tape with my coauthor, Diana Pash. During this summer, Diana Pash spent long hours as my research apprentice. Though she had not been a part of the initial fieldwork, over a summer of videotape viewing, transcription and analysis, she gained familiarity with this research setting and provided invaluable insights that have become part of this article. Looking at day-to-day behaviors in the classroom and, later, in collaboration with Pash, looking more closely at video-recorded interaction of one second-language learner, a tension, narrated in the story above, became strikingly apparent: The child's need to blend in, and his success at blending in, compromised his academic learning. This tension is the subject of this article. The case to be discussed, of Rene, a second grader from Costa Rica, illuminates how the social identity concerns of a second-language learner coexist and sometimes conflict with the academic goals of classroom teaching.<sup>2</sup> In this way, this article makes a theoretical distinction between certain routines of situated learning and those of social identity, and highlights the tension between the two.

We begin with a discussion of both situated cognition and social identity. We then discuss questioning routines as the empirical means to study these issues. Throughout both of these sections, our discussion extends what is already known about phenomena of "passing" (Goffman 1963) and "procedural display" (Bloome et al. 1989), as well as the problematic nature of teacher-questioning routines to a new area: the performance of second-language learners in a mainstream classroom. After providing a brief background on the individual and classroom under discussion, we provide an example of one extended questioning interaction that illustrates the tension between the situated routines of a particular learning task and the very different routines involved in the construction of social identity during that task. As this example will show, Rene has developed a unique form of classroom participation. Rene's skill at mirroring his classmates' answers, gestures, and even impromptu narratives, while giving the impression of social assimilation, compromises his ability to fully engage with lessons. Although he *looks like* he is doing the same thing as his classmates, he is not. But as long as he *looks like* he is, he not only need not learn, he also may not even understand that he is not learning. He develops a different idea of what classroom discourse is, even as, on the surface, he seems to be doing the same thing as his peers.

Because this article examines a problematic context that many second-language learners are likely to face, we conclude with a discussion of both theoretical implications and practical recommendations for the increasing number of mainstream classroom teachers responsible for second-language learners. Our study illuminates now familiar theoretical discussions of questioning routines and situated cognition by examining them in the context of a second language learning situation. Our analysis suggests that an understanding of how questioning (in particular)

and learning (in general) are situated necessitates a theory of how social identity is enacted. As suggested in the title, the practice of *questioning a student* is always simultaneously a practice of *questioning a student's identity*. The case of Rene makes it clear that social identity and social cognition must be theoretically disentangled.

Practical implications of this work follow directly from these theoretical points. Cummins (1996) has already urged teachers to recognize that social competence in a second language is more easily accomplished than academic competence. But our research further suggests that academic achievement can actually be *compromised* by social competence. Keeping in mind the necessarily situated nature of questioning routines, and the potential conflicts between social and academic competence, we emphasize the importance of teachers' analysis and introspection regarding their own classroom discourse patterns. Only by increased awareness of the classroom routines we so unconsciously practice, can teachers in mainstream classrooms make meaningful accommodations to second-language learners—accommodations that mediate between the need to blend in socially and to become academically engaged. Before examining in more detail the interactions in Rene's reading group, we turn to theoretical background that his context illuminates.

### Situated Cognition and Its Conundrums

Much theory and research on situated cognition and learning builds on ideas introduced by Lev Vygotsky (1978) that have been appropriated by various fields (Lee and Smagorinsky 1999). Lave and Wenger (1991) extended Vygotsky's ideas of mentoring and expert/novice relationships by examining how individuals learn through changing participation in a community of practice. Others have used Vygotsky's theory of interactional foundations of learning to reflect on the mediating tools involved in cultural activity (Wertsch 1991, 1998). Similar theoretical work has been conducted by linguists, though this work is not necessarily so directly informed by Vygotsky. Levinson (1992), following Wittgenstein (1958), examines the activity structure or "language games" in which sequences are embedded, as a way of examining situated learning. The entire activity structure, Levinson argues, is a sociocultural phenomenon, such that those familiar with this activity structure are able to follow a teacher's agenda by making appropriate contributions, whereas students who are not familiar with this activity structure (or, in Wertsch's terms "mediational means") will find meaningful participation difficult. Other researchers include even more context in the situation of cognition. Gee (1992, 1997, 1999), for example, would include the history of participation in a society that provides one with the tools to be a competent member.

All of these theorists of situated cognition/learning take a critical as opposed to a prescriptive approach (O'Connor in press). In other words, they do not prescribe situatedness as the best way to learn. Rather, they

conceptualize all cognition as situated, and critique that aspect of the learning. A critical approach to situated cognition recognizes that social identity and instructional goals are often at odds. Reasons for this include the differential value we place on these cultural tools (or mediational means) (Wertsch and Rupert 1993), and our use of them to assert varied identities. Also, use of these tools takes place in a "complex interpersonal context" (Stone 1993). Most relevant for the argument here, the demands of this complex interpersonal context can be at odds with instructional goals. This conflict has serious ramifications for learning. Hanks identifies this tension when he describes the contrast between skills of a community (such as a school classroom), and social routines of that community: "One could imagine an actor who becomes an expert as a learner—that is, who becomes a master at managing the learning situation—but who never actually learns the performance skills themselves" (1991:21).

This study of Rene suggests that he is just such a learner. Becoming an "expert as a learner" without learning "the performance skills themselves" is a conundrum for both Rene and for theories of situated cognition. This conundrum can be illuminated, we argue, by bringing theories of social identity to the examination of situated cognition.

### **Situated Social Identity—In Life and in the Classroom**

#### *Doing "Being Ordinary"*

As Sacks (1975) has pointed out explicitly, and as most native English speakers in the United States know implicitly, "How are you?" when spoken with "Hi," is not usually an open-ended question. It is not even a question about one's personal experience. It is part of another "language game" (Wittgenstein 1958)—a greeting (Sacks 1975). Visitors to this country or those learning English for the first time here will quickly learn this formula. In the words of Sacks (1984: 413), they are learning about "*doing 'being ordinary.'*" This phrase emphasizes that a person is not simply "ordinary" but is always working at achieving this identity. Much of this work is talk, and by looking closely at talk, Sacks was able to uncover the assumptions behind even the simplest exchange or conversational story. As Garfinkel (1967) has also pointed out, these small routines, the building blocks of our social identity, make up the unexamined knowledge of our daily lives. Garfinkel illustrated the assumed nature of these routines through ingenious "breaching" exercises designed to reveal the behavioral formulas everyone takes for granted. But what happens when someone does not intuitively know how to accomplish the ordinary routines of daily life? How does an outsider—in our case, a second-language learner—get along without constantly making the social gaffes illustrated by Garfinkel's breaching exercises?

### Passing

Goffman (1963) studied just this question by looking at what happens in the day-to-day lives of stigmatized people. A *stigma* is something that breaches the norms of day-to-day life. Goffman discussed an incredibly wide range of stigmatized conditions, including alcoholism, deafness, and illiteracy. He examined the elaborate ways people go about covering up stigma and avoiding social breaches—how they manage to “pass” as ordinary people. Building on Goffman’s work, Edgerton (1993) describes, for example, how adults who cannot read “pass” as readers by mastering the routine of fumbling for their glasses, acting as if they forgot them, and then asking someone to read aloud to them.

These observations of the stigmatized who struggle with the routines of the ordinary reveal the detailed interactional terrain that everyone negotiates as they go about answering questions and making their way through the world. As Goldschmidt has written in his introduction to Edgerton’s study, “in a measure, we are all passing, and we are all denying” (1993:xxi). Examining the strategies of the stigmatized reveals not only the routines that we all use unconsciously each day, but also every life’s inevitable existential compromise. There is something about each of us that we lose through our close attention to the routines of the everyday as we move from one social context to another. The extent of that loss varies, however. The nature and degree of that loss, and the pressure to adapt to the routines of the ordinary, can be felt acutely in school classrooms.

#### *Passing in Schools: Doing “Being Student” and Procedural Display*

Doing “being ordinary” is a medium of social identity, a means to get along in and across communities. In schools, doing “being ordinary” can be manifested as doing “being student” and can be a crucial component of school success. However, a review of the literature that examines social routines and classroom learning suggests, at first, that there is a contradiction: In some cases, the facility with which some students adapt the social routines involved in doing “being student” are criticized as “procedural display” (Bloomer 1990; Bloomer et al. 1989) or “safetalk” (Hornberger and Chick 2000), allowing students to “pass” as knowing (Rueda and Mehan 1986; Unsworth 1988) while failing to learn academic skills. In other cases, researchers describe these sorts of routines as essential to school success, an unfortunate discourse-based disadvantage for those not familiar with classroom routines (Delpit 1995; Heath 1983; Philips 1983; Scollon and Scollon 1981; Scribner and Cole 1973; Westby 1997). This is only an apparent contradiction. Both points can be simultaneously true. Learning social routines of the classroom, we argue, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for learning. Furthermore, our study suggests that in some cases, becoming fluent in certain social routines can actually interfere with classroom learning. Knowing how to

look *as if* one understands lesson content and skills (e.g., knowing how to read English) can hinder *knowing* such things. So one can use the techniques of passing (in Goffman's sense) to pass (in the academic sense) from grade to grade. The present study illustrates this conundrum by looking closely at the way a second-language learner participates in small-group discussions about books.

### Questioning Routines as One Cultural Tool for Cognition and Social Identity

The analysis in this article builds on the assumptions that cognition is constituted by the language routines in which students and the teacher participate and that these language routines also mediate social identity. Question sequences are one discourse mode that interactionally instantiates identity and accomplishes other cognitive tasks. However, research on classroom questioning often neglects situated and social aspects of question sequences.

#### *The Display/Referential Dichotomy*

Prescriptive advice on questioning, especially for teachers of second-language learners, often centers on the quest for "meaningful" talk and "genuine" or "real" questions. This research builds on a distinction made by Searle (1969) between "real" and "exam" questions. To identify classroom routines that lead to more meaningful, genuine talk, researchers have looked at differential use of *display* questions (those for which the questioner already knows the answer), and *referential* questions (those for which the questioner does not) (Brock 1986; Brulhart 1986; Long and Sato 1983; Losey 1997; Makin 1996; Pica and Long 1986; see also Chaudron 1988 for an extensive review of the research on teacher questioning). Generally the researchers all begin with the assumption (and end with the advice) that referential questions (also called "open-ended" or "real" questions) are the key to more and richer language use in the classroom.

However, some researchers have questioned whether referential questions, and the quest for "authentic language" is the most effective path to language learning (Cook 1997). At a more fundamental level of critique, others have argued that the display/referential dichotomy itself is problematic because the distinction is contingent on the interactional context (Makin 1996). Often, when questions are viewed as part of an unfolding sequence, teachers appear to be seeking particular answers for even the most open-ended questions (Barnes 1992; Mehan 1985; Perego and Boyle 1997). We also noticed this phenomenon in Rene's reading group. In the following excerpt, for example, the teacher is asking students about their favorite dish. At first it seems her question is an open-ended inquiry about personal preference. But as the questioning

sequence unfolds, a student ends up treating it as a display question, the right answer being "steak":<sup>2</sup>

**Teacher:** What's your favorite dish?

**Student:** (shrugs his shoulders)

**T:** You like *steak*?

**S:** (nods his head)

As this example suggests, even though teachers might accept a wide range of answers, they often have one kind of answer in mind to even the most open-ended or apparently "genuine" of questions. Moreover, students may sense this delimited set of answers as a looming subtext to teacher questions. Students, like the one above, become adept at this language game, waiting to hear possible candidates for what gets constructed as the right answer. It could even be said that students help to create this language game, eliciting from the teacher simple yes or no questions out of what might have been more threatening or confusing "genuine" questions.

Rene learned to play this game too. Questions about personal experience often ended up appearing just like right answer searches, as Rene waited for the teacher to reformulate initial questions about his own experiences into yes or no questions with easy, short answers. In the following excerpt, for example, the teacher wants Rene to talk about experiences with his grandmother. She starts by asking, "What were some things that you remember about her?" but goes on to tell about her own son's grandfather. Instead of describing what his grandmother does, Rene waits to hear the teacher's story, and then agrees (with a conveniently simple head nod) that his grandmother is the same:

**T:** What were some things that you remember about her? (4.6) (12 lines of yes/no questions)

**T:** Did you:: tell her that *you* could speak English? (1.0)

**Rene:** (nods slightly)

**T:** Did you:: show off?

**R:** I speak to her and [she'll go] wha::t?

**T:** That's what Seth does when his *grandfather* comes or *grandmother* comes. He will (0.4) he says, "*granddaddy* listen to me play the piano." Or *granddaddy* watch me do karate. Or "*granddaddy*—he sho:ws off." All the things he's very proud of. Do you do that? (3.0)

**R:** (nods)

Whether the teacher intended it so or not, her initial, potentially open-ended question about Rene's grandmother leads to a yes or no question that looks suspiciously like a right answer search. And it leads to a simple head nod from Rene—he agrees that his experience matches her own son's experiences with grandparents.

As the literature that examines questioning cross-culturally suggests, and as these examples begin to reveal about our own research context, a "genuine" question can swiftly become another kind of

question, depending on the interactional and the sociocultural context (Delpit 1995; Heath 1983; Mehan 1985; Philips 1983; Scollon and Scollon 1981). Furthermore, gaining facility with any type of questioning routine—or language game—is intertwined with issues of social and cultural identity (Duranti and Ochs 1988). Every question comes loaded with layers of sociocultural history, and knowing exactly how to answer known-answer questions as well as the most “open-ended” or “real” of questions involves traversing these layers. As the excerpts above exemplify, one type of language game has evolved in this classroom community: the right-answer search. In this group, students and the teacher work together to create a simple right-answer search out of questions that start as more open-ended inquiries about personal experience.

### *Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Complexity*

Rene's simple nodding response to the initial, more complex question about his grandmother highlights problems not only with a decontextualized display/referential distinction, but also with another common scheme used to categorize classroom questions. Another source of prescriptive advice for teachers is hierarchical taxonomies that sort classroom questions into categories of higher or lower cognitive complexity (Bloom 1969). Bloom's taxonomy takes into account neither the identity concerns that shape questioning routines nor the situated, collaborative, and contingent nature of classroom questioning. Nevertheless, many teachers are still trained to use Bloom's taxonomy as a way of building their lesson plans (Posner 2000), and at least one nationally used language proficiency test still uses this taxonomy to design oral test questions (Dalton 1998).

However, the notion that a question's cognitive complexity can be separated from context has been widely disputed (Cazden 1988; Farrar 1986; Lenoir 1994; Shore 1994). Most critiques of question typologies illustrate a common point: Questions are always part of an overarching activity structure (Levinson 1992) or language game (Wittgenstein 1958), and the ability to participate in those questions depends on one's experience with the social organization of schooling (Gee 1997; Heath 1983; Scribner and Cole 1973). As shown above, students and teachers work together to transform a complex question into a series of yes or no questions requiring as little as a head nod or shake in response (see also Shore 1994). The reverse can happen too. In the reading group with Rene, apparently simple yes or no questions (low-level on Bloom's taxonomy) can become quite complicated in social context. An initial yes or no question often resulted in Rene's careful peer monitoring. In the excerpt below, the teacher asks the group if they ever lie out in the sun (like a girl depicted in a picture book the teacher is reading to them):

- T: Have you ever done that Rene?  
R: (shakes head “no”)  
T: Laid in the //sun and got burned?



- Sara: //I have.  
T: (smiles broadly at Sarah)  
Tasha: //I have (nods, raises hands up)  
R: //Yeah sometimes. (revises previous answer)

Here we see Rene as he tries to mediate between drawing on his own knowledge, and monitoring the right answers of his peers. First, he gives what seems to be an obvious answer, based on facts. He shakes his head, no, he has never laid in the sun. But after his peers chime in with the opposite response, he revises his answer. Instead of treating this question as a simple yes or no question about the facts of his life, Rene now seems to be reading the question, like those in the previous examples, as one that should be answered a right way (according to his classmates' answers). Furthermore, in the video of this interaction, one can observe as he carefully monitors the teacher's approval of Sara's answer ("yes") that contradicts his own. Instead of recognizing this as a straightforward yes or no question about the facts of his life, Rene treats this question as one of the right answer searches commonly constructed within this group. His response suggests that the complexity of a question isn't simply determined by its form, but by one's experience within a certain setting as well as the social background one brings to it. Here, Rene seems to be caught between the need to avoid any social gaffe—that is, to follow the routines of the classroom that often encourage right answers all around—and a less mediated response based on his own experiences. This conflict between language games reveals what Farrar (1986:89) has called "the complexity of the cognitively simple."

In the extended example and analysis later in this article, we analyze in more detail a conflict between the language games that maintain an appearance of social competence (such as giving right answers in a right-answer search) and the academic language games that organize longer sequences of questions and answers (such as a Socratic argument). But before we examine how these issues of situated cognition, social identity, and questioning are played out in an extended classroom questioning sequence, the section below begins to discuss possible relationships between Rene's home environment and his interactions in school.

### **Background: Procedural Display at Home and in School**

The scene in which these issues of identity and questioning are played out is Carter Elementary School, located in a small town in northeast Georgia. Like many schools in rural Georgia, this school has recently begun to receive increasing numbers of second-language learners, the children of immigrants who have moved to Georgia because of the plentitude of jobs. At the time of this study Carter Elementary had no special program in place for educating second-language learners, and instead evenly distributed them among the mainstream classrooms. This study took place in one such mainstream classroom, where the teacher struggled

to integrate two second-language learners into the group. One of these students was very successful in the classroom and quickly moved to the highest reading group and excelled in other academic areas. The other, Rene, though relatively fluent in spoken English, struggled with his reading.

This study of Rene began in October of 1998, when, at the urging of the teacher, who was experiencing her first difficulties with second-language learners in the classroom, I (Betsy Rymes) visited the classroom and then designed a case study to look more closely at Rene and his reading difficulties. (As I was the only person involved in the research at this time, this section of the report will be written in first-person singular.) The first semester consisted primarily of my observation and note-taking in the classroom. I visited the classroom weekly, observing and helping out with all the children. Soon, I began to stay after school to tutor Rene on his reading and drive him home after these sessions. These afternoon home visits, though brief, revealed more about Rene's background. Usually when I would arrive, his mother would be preparing the evening meal and his sister watching television. Rene would grab his bicycle and head for the door while I spoke with his mother about his school progress. The father was always at work when I took Rene home.

Although my visits were brief, and my conversations with Rene's mother limited in scope, there was nothing about this home to suggest domestic trauma or other family difficulties. But I did begin to see hints of other socializing behaviors. Often, as Rene headed for the door, his mother would make displays of ordering him to his room to study. These displays were awkward, and clearly seemed to interrupt a usual after-school routine of biking outside. I began to feel they were for my benefit. The mother always expressed such gratitude for my after-school reading with Rene, and she seemed to want to show that she was doing her part. However, reading was clearly not a typical activity in this household. I never saw printed materials other than those we brought from school; lighting was poor, and the television was the focal object. Oddly, I got the impression that the mother, as she ushered Rene (with backpack) to his room, was doing some procedural display of her own. Unfortunately, my presence, my halting Spanish, my status as a representative of school and university, probably encouraged this sort of display. But Rene's mother's behavior also revealed a certain understanding of school that seemed to reside in this household. School and its procedures were to be displayed and subject to superficial monitoring. Rene's mother, like Rene, would acquiesce.

During my weekly school visits, I also spent time comparing observations with the classroom teacher and our discussions often centered on Rene's attitude toward school. Whether it was in class, during tutoring, or on the playground, Rene was always friendly and personable. Having been in the United States since kindergarten, his spoken English was fluent—passable. But he was always careful about the ways he shared

details about his life. He often created elaborate fabrications—he would tell me about his expensive Nintendo setup, his father's luxury automobile, his many books at home—none of which, it turns out, existed. These stories were also frequently built from the stories of his classmates. Often, when I would press Rene to tell me about his weekend, instead of recounting his own weekend adventures he would wait until a peer shared something he or she had done. Only then would Rene chime in with "I've done that too!" Rarely (though less rarely as the year progressed) would he openly volunteer such information. Now it seems clear that what seemed to me an open-ended question about his weekend was probably taken by Rene as the search for a right answer, a "test" question. "What is it that I *should* have done during the weekend?" he might have been thinking. Like his mother, who sensed that studying after school was the behavior I would approve, Rene seemed to sense that some behaviors were appropriate for him; some experiences were right for him to have had.

This dynamic was increasingly apparent when the teacher would direct questions to Rene during class—especially when those questions pointedly called attention to Rene's background and former life in Costa Rica. When the teacher would press Rene to talk about Costa Rica, or compare his cultural practices to those of his classmates, he would become noticeably quiet. On these occasions Rene did not have classmates' responses against which he could compare his own. Although he was trying to carefully blend in, his teacher was trying to draw attention to his unique background. These well meaning attempts to bring Rene's difference into the classroom seemed troubling to him. Such close attention was clearly not pleasant, especially when it accentuated his difference from his classmates. It was as if the teacher were blowing his cover, making it impossible for him to continue passing as someone who fit inconspicuously into classroom life. Again, Rene seemed to be reading even the teacher's most honestly curious questions about his own background as a search for some right answer. Usually Rene was successful at this game, and, when the questions were not directed to his own personal experience, he appeared eager and competent in class discussions.

Ironically, because Rene was usually so good at "passing" as competent in oral discourse, he became a candidate not for ESOL designation but for special education. Because Rene seemed fluent in oral English, both the administrator in charge of placement and the teacher began to suspect that his difficulties with reading and writing were not related to his language background. Placement for Rene into special education would have easily been accomplished. His standardized test scores were low enough, and because his spoken English was relatively fluent, school administrators did not think these low scores were related to his language background. All that was needed to bump Rene out of the mainstream classroom was a recommendation from the teacher.

Rene's teacher, however, honestly did not know what would be best for him. She was an experienced teacher, but not experienced with the changing, increasingly multilingual population in Georgia schools. A white, monolingual English speaker, a middle-class mother of two in her midthirties, this teacher had been successful in teaching children much like her own. Rene, however, was proving less amenable to her teaching style. She had already kept him back one year (he was repeating second grade) due to his reading difficulties, but her experience told her that he was not an appropriate candidate for special education. Consistent with this teacher's intuitions, research indicates that second-language learners often are orally proficient after two years, but need up to seven years to catch up academically, and achieve fluency at decontextualized academic tasks like reading for information (Collier 1997; Cummins 1996; Thomas and Collier 1997). Rueda (1996) has argued that the tendency for oral fluency to occur long before reading fluency among second-language learners could lead to many incorrect designations in special education. Accordingly, Rene's teacher was reluctant to have him removed from her room to attend special education classes. So, with her permission and encouragement, I decided to track his progress with the goal of understanding the nature of his academic struggles. What was causing his reading difficulty? And how was his difficulty in writing and reading (literacy in the narrow sense) related to his oral interaction in the reading group (literacy practices in a broader sense)?

The answer to these questions only started to become apparent after the second phase of the study, which involved weekly videotaping and analysis of Rene's participation in a small reading group. As illustrated in the following analysis of one videotaped interaction, Rene's attempt to blend in is crucial to his language development because it affects his participation in classroom literacy events. Indeed, his "I've done that!" refrain was his way of "doing 'being student,'" of figuring out how to be ordinary. It was his way of "passing," and he became quite successful at it. But in the process, he was missing out on other learning. As illustrated in the extended example below, certain types of oral participation, while giving a superficial impression of competence, actually detract from the academic routine in play.

### **An Extended Example of a Questioning Interaction**

#### *A Note on Method*

Selection of examples in an article of this sort often draws scrutiny. We ask the reader to follow our story, to accept that our examples are representative and that our story does justice to the characters (our research participants) within it. As the two authors of this article spent one summer working together as researchers, we followed our intuitions, but we also accounted for them by examining multiple layers of data. Our examination of Rene's discourse in the reading group videotapes began

with an observation that seemed consistent with the patterns of interaction one of us had already begun to observe in Rene's interactions in other contexts. In this way, our selection of the example below was guided by qualitative criteria developed through the first author's participant observation in the school, discussion with the teacher and student, individual tutoring sessions with the student, conversations in the car, home visits, and discussions with the student's mother. These observations were made relevant as, together as a research team, we pored over videotapes retrospectively and compared impressions. Specifically, we noticed in this reading group the same tendency of Rene to always closely monitor his peers for answers—even when the teacher was asking apparently open-ended questions. This led us to focus on the questioning routine as our unit of analysis, and particularly those questioning routines that struck us as qualitatively unique. We labeled the routine "fake open-ended questions"—because what started as open-ended questioning often was treated as nothing of the sort—and we began to investigate how this routine could be related to Rene's reading troubles.

The following "fake open-ended" questioning sequence illustrates how this routine interferes with the development of school-based literacy practices. This particular example has been selected for its aptness as a representation of the multiple layers of data collected. As Gee and Green have noted about their own microethnographic work in schools, "no single point in the analysis would have been sufficient, and no single approach would have provided the information obtained" (1998:159). Likewise, we have looked at the relationship between Rene's talk and his literacy by analyzing sociocultural, interactional, and historical dimensions of his work in school, as well as the moment-to-moment dynamics of interaction around reading books.

#### *A Representative Example*

This example illustrates the way Rene's interactional habits developed through talk, as well as the possible effect those habits had on his competence with school-based literacy routines. In the following excerpt, the teacher asks students a series of questions embedded in a Socratic line of questioning, meant to lead to an overarching point (see also Levinson 1992). As Rene participates in this routine, it becomes clear that he is not paying attention to this overarching, more decontextualized point. Instead, he uses an alternative strategy: looking to fellow students to come up with an answer.

Rene's strategy of echoing peers' responses is most clearly illustrated in the example below, in which the teacher uses a picture from a book they are reading, *Big Old Bones* (Carrick 1989), to begin talking about the book's temporal setting. This book takes place at the beginning of the 20th century, and tells the story of a confused professor who is trying to piece together, in the shape of a dinosaur, some "big old bones" he has

excavated. The story includes interaction with reporters as they document the professor's various possible constructions of the dinosaur skeleton. In the illustration, reporters are questioning the professor about his project. Everyone is dressed in Turn of the Century clothing—quite different from the clothing one might see today on a trip to Wal-Mart—and the teacher tries to emphasize this contrast as she questions the students about hats and suits:

- T: **Do they dress like we dress today?**  
 David: Unh-uh (no)=  
 →R: =No  
 T: No: they don't do they.  
 →R: //jus: ties (gestures with hand as if wearing a tie)  
 T: //What do all the men have on their heads?  
 Tracy: Hats.  
 T: Hats. Do men wear a lot of hats now? (12 lines of discourse on train hats)  
 T: But do men, do a lot of men wear: hats now?  
 Tr: *Uhm-uh.* (shakes head deliberately no)  
 T: No they // don't do they.  
 D: //yes they do.  
 T: Do you see a lot of men outside //when you go to (.) Wal-Mart  
 Tr: //uh-huh (yes)  
 T: //or:  
 Tr: //I don't see nobody.  
 →R: //(nods head slightly, indicating "yes")  
 T: Do you see a lot of men with //hats on?  
 Tr: //I don't.  
 →R: (looks at the teacher, smiles, and shakes head "no")  
 T: Do you see a lot of 'em with suits on  
 R: Yea:h. (looks at Tracy while he says this)  
 Tr: (undecipherable)  
 T: We usually see men with suits on what day?  
 Tr: //Church.  
 D: //Church.  
 T: Yeah maybe after //church.  
 D: //or when you go like to: //somewhere to die  
 →R: //I went (.) before to a church.  
 Tr: //a funeral.  
 D: (looks at Tracy) A funeral.  
 T: A funeral. Yeah.  
 Tr: Or a *wedding*.  
 D: You *need* to wear it then.  
 T: **Okay so do you think this is happenin'- that this story's takin' in the (.) past? or th- in a- //in no:w?=**  
 D: //history  
 T: **=or in the future.**  
 →R: //I love this story.  
 D: //history. This is *history*.  
 T: It's history. So it's in the past. You love this story Rene? Okay, so Mr. Potts has come outside of his door . . .

The boldface at the start and conclusion of the example above highlights the framing questions that guide the teacher's line of questioning. The marginal arrows highlight Rene's responses. Together these different sets of contributions illustrate the coexistence of *two different activities—two language games—going on simultaneously*. The rules of the teacher's game might be paraphrased as follows: To answer the teacher's question correctly, you must *select carefully* from your own experience in order to find an example that supports the overarching thesis that people dress differently today than they do in the book. In contrast, Rene's language game is played to preserve his identity as student. The rules of Rene's game apply to each questioning sequence and might be paraphrased as follows: For each individual question, follow what your peers say and the teacher approves, then contribute something similar.

These conflicting language games are not very evident as long as students can follow the rules of one game without violating the rules of the other. This is the case as the sequence begins. The first several lines illustrate a typical Initiation/Response/Evaluation (IRE) exchange in which Rene echoes David's response:

- T: Do they dress like we dress today?  
 D: Unh-uh (no)=  
 →R: =No  
 T: No: they don't do they?

Here, Rene does "being student" by slipping his answer into a typical IRE sequence: The teacher initiates with her yes or no question, David and Rene respond, and the teacher evaluates their response in terms of the right answer. But as the interaction continues and students begin to give conflicting answers, this strategy does not work as well for Rene, and his own strategy—his careful tracking of his peers' responses—no longer yields responses that fit within the rules of the teacher's language game.

As the interaction progresses, the teacher returns to her questioning comparisons of the people pictured and people today, zeroing in on hats. After the students digress and discuss train hats for some time, she returns to her point with, "But do men, do a lot of men wear hats now?" As Tracy and David give conflicting answers, Rene remains silent. Until there is an answer that seems unanimously correct, he does not provide an answer. This is in keeping with the rules of his language game. But his strategy is uncovered when the teacher further questions the students, encouraging them to draw on their own experiences by having them think about "when you go to Wal-Mart." Following Tracy's responses closely, Rene makes a swift about-face from a "yes" (on the heels of Tracy's affirmative "uh huh") to a "no" (on the heels of Tracy's negative "I don't see nobody"). Rene's rapid self-correction serves the teacher's instructional agenda, but it is not based on recognition of her instructional goals or the rules of her language game. Instead, Rene reaches this

response by closely monitoring the IRE exchange and the responses of his peers.

This about-face illustrates the tension between social identity (and the language game that supports this) and academic interaction (and the teacher's language game that supports this). In service to his social identity as a good student, as part of doing "being student," Rene uses the strategy of tracking his peers' answers, saying what they say whenever possible. His answers seem in no way to be guided by the larger activity structure or the teacher's language game in progress. Furthermore, his strategy is ineffectual because the other students are not following the rules of the teacher's language game either. Students who cooperate with this sort of Socratic questioning routine would answer by providing examples from their experience that show people dress differently today than they do in the book. However, none of the students in the group seems to be thinking this way—if they were, the answer to the teacher's question would be "no." When students say "yes," there are men outside Wal-Mart with hats on, they may not be thinking about the book at all anymore, but about *what they really see outside Wal-Mart*. In rural Georgia, this may include a lot of men with hats—baseball caps at least. With this in mind, it becomes clear that to answer the teacher's question correctly, one should *not* be entirely guided by personal experience, but by the point that the teacher is getting at—that the men in the book are very different from the men we see today. Because of this, we know the book took place in the past. This question should have a simple answer, and for anyone following the teacher's line of questioning—the rules of her language game—the question does have a simple answer. But if one reads the teacher's question as simply one about experience, ignoring the comparisons to the book and the point she is making, one might easily imagine men outside Wal-Mart with hats on.

By not following the teacher's arguments and inadvertently missing her underlying assumptions, the students have drawn attention to those assumptions. Now their only strategy to arrive at the right answer is to follow the familiar clues embedded in the IRE routine and to gauge the acceptance of each other's responses. Only gradually do they realize that the right answer is "no." A lot of men don't wear hats today. So, as the students read the teacher, Rene reads the students, and their fickle right answer search is reflected in Rene's lightning speed switch from "yes" nods to "no" headshakes. Suddenly the men he saw in hats have disappeared!

As the excerpt continues, the teacher tries to elicit a new example, another analogy, from the students' experiences. Instead of using hats, she tries suits. This example meets with as little success. When the teacher asks if we see men with suits on today, Rene quickly responds with "yeah," but as evidenced by his eye gaze captured in the video, not without a glance at Tracy to see what answer she will provide.

- T: Do you see a lot of 'em with suits on?  
 R: //yeah. (looks questioningly at Tracy while he says this)



Anyone following the teacher's argument and the rules of her language game would know that this question about suits is analogous to the question about hats. We do not see men wearing suits today, just as we do not see men wearing hats. From the teacher's perspective, this is real-life evidence that the book took place in the past. As far as she is concerned, the answer to the question about whether men wear suits today is "no." Rene's "wrong" answer of "yeah," however, reveals that once again he is not playing by the rules of her game. As his glance at Tracy indicates, his answer is instead founded on expected peer concordance.

As the teacher proceeds, she draws students' attention to the specific day that some men wear suits (Sunday) to emphasize that this is different from the occasion in the book. The men in the book wear hats and suits all the time. Again, as the teacher talks about Sunday, Rene's contribution to the discussion ("I went before to a church") indicates he is not playing her game, but one of his own. He is participating, and trying to use clues from the immediate talk to guide his participation, but his contributions are not related at all to the teacher's agenda, or the overall analogy she is making.

After the discussion of suits, the teacher finally makes the goal of her series of experience-based questions explicit. Despite having thought about men in hats and suits that they see today, there is no evidence that the students have drawn on these experiences to understand that this book takes place in the past. David has talked about weddings and funerals and argued that we do indeed see men in hats and suits today. Still, when the teacher asks her culminating question about when this book takes place ("OK, so do you think this is happenin'—that this story's takin' in the past? or th- in a- in no:w? or in the future"), he recognizes that the answer is "the past," or in David's words, "This is history." Whether or not he sees the intervening questions as related, David has at least conveyed that he understands the overall point. Rene's response, on the other hand, indicates that, despite having contributed answers to the Socratic line of questioning leading up to this point, his contributions are based on more immediate sequential dynamics rather than the overarching logic of the teacher's questioning activity. His response to the teacher's question is, "I love this story." Careful tracking of his peers' responses may have given him the right answers on a question-by-question basis, but it has detracted his attention from the overarching lesson about books in general: how we can make sense of them, in part, by comparing them to our own lives.

So far this analysis may seem to focus on modifications *Rene* needs to make in order to understand the teacher's language game. But I do not mean to suggest that the teacher needn't take responsibility for her own discussion strategies. In the excerpt analyzed here, it seems that neither the teacher nor the student have been adapting successfully to one another's norms. They play their own language games in parallel. Rene is not adjusting his answers to fit within the teacher's line of Socratic questioning,

nor is the teacher adjusting her own practices to accommodate Rene's interpretations. During the course of this interaction, she does not display any attempt to alter her pattern of questioning, even after it seems to have gone awry. However, in the months that followed this taping, the teacher acknowledged to me her own recognition that, in this group in particular, her teaching felt ineffectual. To combat this intuition, she began to research the practice of "reciprocal teaching" (Palinscar and Brown 1989). Her teaching began to reflect this work as she began explicitly outlining her cognitive processes and encouraging her students to do the same. She was attempting to emerge from the stalemate of conflicting language games by training the students in her own cognitive strategies. This explicit instruction in interactional routines (such as questioning techniques) was her strategy for overcoming the differential discourse routines that Rene and other students brought to the classroom.

## Discussion

Rene's strategy—using close attention to peer responses within a pattern of IRE—reveals the conflict between his identity concerns and the goals of the lesson. This conflict is played out in his responses to questioning routines. On the one hand, Rene is familiar enough with the routines of classroom discourse—in this case, the IRE pattern—to closely monitor his peers' answers and come up with similar ones of his own, to do "being student." On the other hand, he does not seem to be familiar with the teacher's language game, the use of the series of questions based on an overarching principle.

Familiarity with this kind of routine—the rules of this language game—may be founded on patterns of socialization that begin long before students ever set foot in a classroom. Our anecdotal evidence further suggests that students have differential familiarity with ways of asking questions and making points that are common in school. The teacher remembered using the same line of questioning about *Big Old Bones* (Carrick 1989) in the advanced reading group with no problems. These students had no trouble coming up with the "correct" experiences to support the teacher's point. But it may be that these students were drawing on their familiarity with this type of reasoning and questioning routine as much as the content of their own experiences. The responses of the group of struggling readers, and Rene's close monitoring of them, draw attention to the fact that, when embedded in a certain line of questions, one must select from one's experiences "correctly"—that is, according to the rules of the overarching language game. Rene's alternative strategy, production of "right answers" within the IRE sequence, works to support the construction of his identity as a competent student while undermining his attention to the language routines he might need to actually become that good student. Until he learns to monitor the teacher's language game, he will merely be "passing."

This example is representative of many exchanges that reproduce in miniature the months of problematic interactions that both teacher and researcher experienced while working with Rene. And, in hindsight, they echo the kind of display Rene's mother would make for me when I brought him home from school. They expose the interactional mechanisms that evolve and perpetuate Rene's ever-present refrain of "I've done that too," his fabrications about toys from home, and his hesitancy to talk about himself. This interaction illustrates the tension between understanding overarching classroom practices, and individuals' identity concerns as they struggle to fit in, to do "being student" or enact "procedural display." This tension is illuminated through analysis of the conflicting language games involved in achieving these goals.

### **Implications**

It has been claimed that "the heart of literacy instruction is reading aloud to children," and sharing the experience of books through talking about them together (Peregoy and Boyle 1997:179). We tend to agree with this. But the statement needs both practical and theoretical refinement. What practices are associated with this activity? Not just any talking around books is helpful. As examples in Rene's reading group indicate, certain kinds of talk around books is cognitively complex, culturally specific, and indispensable to school-based literacy. But, as we have shown, achievement of important literacy routines can be compromised by concerns of social identity. This observation has both practical and theoretical ramifications.

First, in practical terms, how can teachers, reading aloud to children and hoping that such reading is effective instruction, be sure that it is? Because the instructional efficacy of oral reading and questioning is so contingent on the activity and interaction in which it is embedded, the best advice to teachers, based on our observations, is to become, if not formal teacher-researchers, at least ad hoc discourse analysts in their own classrooms, closely examining discourse and looking for implicit rules to language games that may come into conflict and lead to unproductive discussion. Being such a discourse analyst also entails extending the field of inquiry beyond the classroom. Our own analysis of videotaped discourse was informed by observations at home, on the playground, and in after-school tutoring sessions. Teachers might capitalize on these sources of understanding as they investigate discourse, implement changes in their classrooms, or monitor decisions regarding placement of second-language learners into special education programs.

These practical implications highlight a theoretical distinction we have tried to draw out in this article: a distinction between the routines that preserve one's social identity and those of school-based literacy. Explicitly accounting for the routines of social identity as part of the situation of cognition addresses at least two problems: (1) Though there is a great deal of work that looks at social identity as it is constructed in

schools (e.g., Bucholtz 1999; Mendoza-Denton 1996), this research stops short of linking this important perspective to academic learning; and, conversely, (2) though there is a great deal of work that conceptualizes cognition as situated, this work is often done in more idealized situations (e.g., Hutchins 1995; Lave and Wenger 1991), where the possibility of conflicting identities and associated language routines is minimized. By looking at a second-language learner, the current study highlights issues of blending in and of learning. As such, this study illuminates both the social aspects of situated cognition as well as the element of learning that may be highlighted or obscured by issues of social identity. Continued examination of the interactions of second-language learners will lead to greater depth of understanding of the immense social and academic hurdles they face, and, at the same time, provide a more layered account of situated cognition by looking at contexts where multiple routines and goals mediate participation.

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## Notes

*Acknowledgments.* This study was made possible by a Collaborative Research Grant and a Summer Faculty Research Grant from the University of Georgia's College of Education, as well as the ongoing input and insight of JoBeth Allen and Joan Kelly Hall. The participation of Diana Pash was funded by a graduate fellowship from the California State University System. Rose Trujillo and Annie Hill assisted in data collection and transcription. This article also benefited from the immensely helpful input of three anonymous reviewers. Finally, this research could never have been undertaken without the generous and courageous participation of the teacher.

1. Student and school names are pseudonyms.

2. Transcription conventions, as follows, are based on the system originally formulated by Gail Jefferson (1984), but modified to conform with AEQ conventions. In our production of transcripts, we have tried to use only the level of detail that serves our analytical point. In this first excerpt, for example, *steak* is italicized, indicating emphatic stress. This intonation seems, in our analysis, to be relevant to the interaction, because the student subsequently treats *steak* as a right answer—thus, our contention about the “right answer search.” Other conventions used are as follows: A colon “:” denotes sound stretch, (e.g., “No::”); parentheses enclose the analysts’ description, (e.g., “(shrugs his shoulders)”); double slash marks “//” denote onset of overlap; numbers in parentheses denote silence intervals in terms of seconds (e.g., “(2.4)”; a period denotes falling intonation, a question mark denotes sentence-final rising intonation; equal signs “=” denote sentence continuation across an interruption; a period enclosed in parentheses “(.)” denotes a brief, untimed silence; and boldface indicates utterances

of analytic focus. For all the transcripts here, a reading (aloud) that incorporates the scripted intonation should convey the flavor the interaction. See also Ochs (1979), Duranti (1997), and Gee (1999) for useful descriptions of transcription choices and analytical thrust.

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SOURCE: Anthropology & Education Quarterly 32 no3 S 2001

WN: 0124404503002

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