

THE ROLE OF PERFORMANCE FOR STUDENT AGENCY:
A DISCOURSE PERSPECTIVE ON WHOLE-GROUP INTERACTION
IN INTERMEDIATE GERMAN CLASSES

Abstract

This project investigates the contribution of performance activities such as role plays to the co-construction of interaction and student agency in undergraduate foreign language classrooms in the United States. The theoretical foundation integrates social and performance theory, sociocultural views of language (learning), and performance-based pedagogies and offers a versatile framework for understanding student agency in interaction. The framework is capable of supporting an analysis of micro-level conversational cues in classroom interaction as well as a macro-level interpretation of participant assumptions about language learning, cultural patterns, and institutional norms. Methodologically, the micro-level is realized by multimodal conversation analysis and through Goffman's concept of footing; the macro-level is based in performance theory. Classroom video recordings as well as participant interviews form the primary data. For the purposes of this project, students display agency when they take responsibility for shaping the social and linguistic environment of the classroom, in particular when they take up discourse functions usually reserved for the teacher, such as managing topics, framing, engaging in face work to include quieter students, and commenting (at times critically) on cultural norms. Results from the video data show that student agency, which occurs largely in conversational frameworks, is encouraged by playfulness and realized by shifting and layering conversational stances. Explicit performance activities appear to authorize playfulness, often beyond the performance activity itself. In contrast, the interview data suggest that participants - both students and teachers - tend to prioritize "normal", largely teacher-controlled classroom activities over performance, and in particular, they devalue the uncertain and awkward linguistic and social spaces performance activities tend to create. These perspectives are consistent with documented preconceptions about language learning, but they limit participants' perception of the opportunities for student agency that performance can generate. With the help of performance theory, I make the case that shifting teacher and student mindsets toward a positive valuation of liminal spaces can contribute to a changed classroom culture that aims at developing qualities such as resilience, tolerance of ambiguity, and symbolic competence, which are relevant for language learning but also for thriving in any environment where change is the norm.

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