

Report summary: students use of ethnographic writing to reflect on their languaging actions for enacting relations with others

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Beach R. Report summary: students use of ethnographic writing to reflect on their languaging actions for enacting relations with others. *Child Adolesc Psych.* 2021;6(S2):1

ABOUT THE STUDY

One important factor in adolescents' development has to do with their ability to reflect on their use of language in their interactions with others, reflections that lead to change in their interactions with others [1]. This includes adolescents' ability to contextualize their language use for engaging in particular social and cultural contexts given differences in their peers' race, class, and/or gender [2].

Students can employ writing to reflect on specific uses of language to build supportive relations with others [3]. They may employ ethnographic writing that focuses on identifying the social and cultural norms constituting their identities and relations within a peer group, sports teams, organizations/clubs, or online contexts, for example, learning to use "insider language" unique to members of a group or team [4,5].

In this study, we were interested in examining adolescents' use of ethnographic writing to reflect on their use of languaging. Adopting a languaging perspective involves examining the use of language as actions for enacting relations with others based on adhering to certain norms in interaction events, for example, norms constituting trust in relations with others [6-8].

The teacher in this study assigned her 12th grade students to engage "mini-ethnography" writing in which they portrayed their use of languaging in interactions with others. Of these 28 students in this study, 5 identified Black, 2 as Latinx, 1 as Asian American, and 20 as White. Students were asked to write a two-to-four-page report in which they described their group, the specific use of language employed in their group, the norms and roles constituting language in their group, clothing or vestments typically worn in the group, interests and beliefs shaping the group's identity, and descriptions of specific activities or traditions valued in their group as well as how membership in the group shaped their identities.

She also had students then write reflections on their reports on an Excel sheet to prompts about their specific ways of talking/communication with others, their ethical concern/trust in a group, how others in their school perceive their groups, and how their particular languaging actions in their group shape others' perceptions of their group.

We then coded the students' ethnographic writing and written reflections to generate a rank order of the most frequent versus less frequent types of languaging students portrayed in their writing and their reflections about their writing. Students were most likely to focus in both their writing and their reflections on making connections, understandings, collaboration, and support for others, an indication of how they value the importance of building supportive peer relations with others. For example, one student described how he valued his peers supporting him in ways that bolstered in self-confidence related to enhancing his interactions with others. Students were next most likely to focus on how they enact certain identities/roles within their groups or sports teams, for example, being perceived as having expertise or abilities associated with assuming identities leading to having a sense of belonging to their groups.

Students also next described their uses of "insider language"[4] related to descriptors unique to their group, for example, members of a cheerleading team use of specific terms for describing different, unique types of cheers. Students also perceived the importance of how certain beliefs, ethics, or values shape their languaging actions for enacting trusting relations, for example, how Muslim students noted the importance of adhering to their Muslim beliefs.

Given that languaging includes expression of emotions/feelings, students also noted how they expressed their emotions to enact relations, for example, voicing emotions in their speeches to engage their audiences. At the same time, they also noted instances of tensions, conflicts, and exclusion in their interactions, as well as the value of playful, humorous languaging for mitigating these negative interactions. They were less like to focus on instances of using humor/joking, assuming leadership roles, and benefitting from their coaches' languaging.

This research suggests the value of having adolescents write and reflect on their languaging about specific interaction events to identify how uses of specific kinds of languaging serve to enact their relations with others. In addition to having students employ ethnographic writing, teachers could also have students engage in "freeze framing" of events [9] by observing, recording, and transcribing their peers' interactions to reflect on their peers specific languaging for enacting relations. Engaging in these writing and reflection activities may contribute to students' increased awareness of how their languaging actions serve to enact positive, supportive languaging actions over time [1].

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Received date: February 07, 2022; **Accepted date:** February 21, 2022; **Published date:** February 28, 2022



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