




**Symbolic competence and classroom  
practice:  
in adult immigrant  
language education**

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What kind of program builds symbolic competence in students?

Can this be accomplished with certain classroom practices alone?



## Adult ESL Program:

### English on Wheels

Salinas, California

1973-80

120 students

Lotte & Alan Marcus

Influences:

Paolo Freire, John Gumperz (UCB)

Luis Valdez (*Teatro Campesino*)

## Context: 1970s Salinas Valley, California



strawberries, lettuce, tomatoes, spinach: “stoop” labor  
United Farm Workers (UFW)



# Asymmetric multilingual interactions: major differences in power between interlocutors

## **The Students**

migrant farmworkers

- mostly Mexican
- many without legal papers

## **Their Salinas interlocutors:**

Anglo growers

government agency workers, teachers

business people, landlords etc.

# English-on-Wheels

## 1. Goals

- improve communication between locals and migrant farmworkers
- train teachers, social agency workers in the “contradictions, ambiguities and constraints of students and clients face daily in struggle to ‘integrate’”



## 2. Procedures

Identify situations of chronic miscommunication

- Interviewed students at school
- Visited agencies
- Visited homes

### 3. Created dramatic texts based on themes

Clip #1







### **3. Interrogate these texts in class:**

Who's not SPEAKING?

Who's not LISTENING??

And...Why???

De-code the underlying context at the level of  
symbolic representations, actions, & power

## Who's not SPEAKING?

Lotte: How do you feel when you talk to Americans, people at a social level different from yours?

Student: We feel very much beneath these people, inferior, we'd just rather not say anything.

## 4. Drama about housing discrimination:

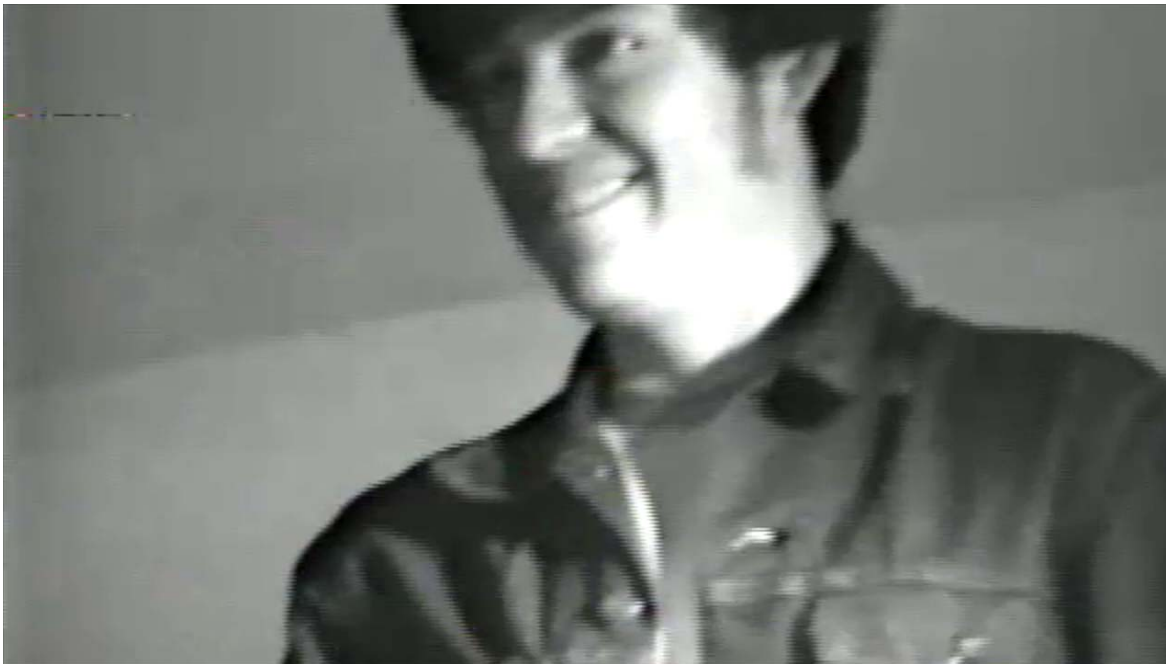
**“Do I happen to be talking to a person of Spanish-speaking background?”**



# 5. Reframing

Clip #2

Do you know the law prohibit discrimination?



## 5. Reframing: model from a pro

Clip #3

Maybe we could sit down and discuss the possibility of my renting the place?



## 6. Changing participation and practice

Taking the fight for fair housing to city hall,  
then to court

Clip #4



## 7. Reflecting on symbolic action: meeting with city officials

Clip #5

Black people don't sit in the back of the bus, Mexican people don't sit in the back of the hall.



What characterizes programs that engage students in the building of symbolic competence?

**Goals: Learning to “talk back”**

- 1. Investigate themes of critical miscommunication**
- 2. Focus on how problems are “crystalized” in language**
- 3. Use dramatic texts that embody ways that power relations are reproduced**
- 4. Interrogate texts at 3 levels**
- 5. Practice ways of reframing, changing outcomes**
- 6. Change daily participation and practices outside of classrooms through reflection and analysis**