

Do discourses of a Classes Contribute to Its Heterogeneity?

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Abstract: *The present study tried to take a critical look on the issue of heterogeneity of the class. It examined the educational discourses of students and teachers in order to shed some light on the factors contribute to the issue of heterogeneity in terms of language knowledge and speaking ability. It also aimed at providing a blue print of teaching and behaving for teachers confront similar situations. In doing that, a class of general English class at B.A level was observed during its whole course and the gathered data were examined critically. Results indicated that the power of teacher is the main factor to be considered and manipulated in making a class homogeneous. It, however, is only a small part of the story of having a homogenous class in terms of speaking ability.*

Key terms: *critical discourse analysis, heterogeneous classes, higher education, language knowledge and speaking ability.*

Introduction

Different scholars have defined and treated heterogeneous classes in different ways. Millrood (2002) considered heterogeneous classes a combination of successful and unsuccessful learners and believes that the symmetry of needs of “whole class of individuals” should be met sufficiently. Fialkova (2012) verified Geneva`s (2002) view point on heterogeneous classes and argues that using students with higher level of knowledge as “assistants” while teaching, implying illustrative materials and culturally sensitive courses are among strategies teachers can imply to meet the gender, language ability, religion and ethnical diversity of students. Leaver`s (1993) study implies that students` learning style is the most important factor teachers need to focus on when selecting tasks for heterogeneous classes. A somewhat different view on the issue of heterogeneity of a class can be examining its discourses, which seems to be disregarded by many researchers of education area.

Classroom discourse analysis concerns examining discourse or language-in-use in classroom context. It tries to embrace a bunch of factors can potentially effect the nature of interactions and discourses in the classroom context. Classroom discourse analysis is therefore believed to be both descriptive and prescriptive. It focuses on naturally occurring data and tries to identify

patterns of interaction and discourse. Common to all approaches of classroom discourse analysis are examining the language and trying to positively affect discourses of similar and subsequent classes in order to facilitate the processes of their getting desired learning and teaching goals. That is the way classroom discourse analysis can turn into critical classroom discourse analysis (Rymes, 2008). Walsh (2006) maintains that approaches to analyze classroom discourse fall under at least three main categories. **Interaction analysis approach as the first main approach** mainly depends on observing interactions and events of the classroom (Brown & Rogers, 2002) and therefore can be considered a realization of behavioral psychology as it supposes that there is a stimulus response cycle in the classroom discourse. Walsh (2002) considers classroom context the product of interaction and discourse in relation with the pedagogical aims of the lessons and believes in the crucial role of understanding interactional processes in providing and facilitating learning opportunities. Inan (2012) compared the interaction patterns of native and non-native English language teachers on account of the fact that interactional exchanges can significantly attribute to the process of second language learning. He audio recorded some classes of NS and NNS teachers in order to identify the basic classroom interactions, corrective feedback and scaffolding techniques used by them. Results indicated that NS teachers more patient with regard to the errors students had in the classroom. NNS teachers, however, corrected most of their errors. Interactional patterns in both contexts was another example of the traditional English language teaching classes; question, response and feedback. Teachers mainly asked questions and only when students were not able to answer correctly, they used their most common scaffolding method “alternative questions”. Rido, Ibrahim and Nambiar (2014) believe that examining the interaction strategies of teachers unveil the extent to which they fulfil their pedagogic roles successfully. Upon investigating the interactions of an EFL classroom by a master teacher they identified four main interaction strategies enhanced interactive learning; control of interaction or interaction management strategies (e.g., raising tone when emphasizing some points as well as asking questions), repairing or error treatment strategies (in a way that repeating and modifying students answers so many times and asking students to repeat the answers), speech modification and feedback strategies (e.g., valuing every response and using positive feedbacks commonly) and eliciting or questioning strategies (e.g., posing various questions relevant to the topic and particular to students by saying their names).

Molinaria and Mamelia (2010) argue that questions teachers direct to their students usually control the subsequent interactions in the classroom through referring to some pre-specified points. Almost 95% of all questions on a class are asked by teachers. Dillon (1998) also asserted that students, the true and only seekers of knowledge in educational contexts do not ask any question at all. Teachers mainly tend to ask low level questions whose answers to a large extent depend on the memorizing ability of students (Mehan, 1979). Then, encouraging students to ask questions is a good way of expanding their knowledge and provoking their cognitive disequilibrium which in turn may lead to creating a learner centered class (Almedia, 2012) and developing students` power of thinking (Hunkins, 1989). Rezaee and Farahian (2012) however,

looked at the speech dominance of teachers from a different perspective based on which smart questions of teachers can help them get students` attention and some feedback which is of help in controlling and managing the class.

System based approaches of classroom discourse analysis in the same way focus on some fixed patterns and categories that have been come up as a result of different observations in this context (Wallace, 1998). They are supposed to be in contradiction with the micro ethnographic classroom discourse analysis, as the latter tends to see students and teachers practices as context specific and dynamic emerge through the local interactional practices. It further more it focuses on the tacit and unreflective conventions of behavior in society, social order and power relations in order to know about the ways and the extent to which students and teachers prompt those norms. Norman Fairclough`s approach of discourse analysis also considers a relationship between textual and social worlds and examine language critically (Kress & Hodge, 1979). It pays attention to systemic functional grammar of Halliday (1979) and social and sociolinguistic theories of discourse (Foucault, 1972).

Despite all the apparent deficits one may presume for the system based approaches of classroom discourse analysis, it has led to informative points. Twiner et al. (2014) investigated the meaning making process involved in dialogic discourses of teacher and students and mentioned that unexpected interruptions and questions of students can lead to negotiation and construction some shared knowledge. Bellack et al. (1966) tried to identify the pedagogical moves of interactions of students and teachers in order shed light on the common teaching cycles to different classes. They investigated the interactions of more than three hundred students and their teachers and argued that some moves like solicit, response and reaction usually occur together. Some recent studies, however, warn against using such sequences in the classroom interactions on account of contributing to teacher centered situations (e.g., Kasper, 2001). Students therefore are encouraged to take a more tangible role in classroom discourses. Barekat and M ahmoodi (2014) asserted that improving speaking ability can be contributed to a large extent by the establishment of the dialogic discourse patterns in the classroom.

Conversation analysis approach relies on investigating interactions with regard to context and meaning (Heritage, 1997). Studies followed conversation approach focus on such issues as turn taking (Allwright, 1980), topic switches, and features of routine conversations such as false starts and hesitations in a local context. Proponents of the last approach are believed to be governed by the principle of structural and functional linguistic. They seemed to be concerned with the speech acts and functions can be done using discourse (Edwards and Westgate, 1994). Cevasco and Broek (2013) regard discourse comprehension as a fundamental element of student learning and focus on conversational devices of making connection in spoken discourse. Exploring some collections of three-turn discourses of ESL classes resulted in the conclusion that the most practical and local contingencies in the third turn which belongs to teachers are correcting errors, reformulating questions and evaluation (Lee, 2007). Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) listed the

speech acts can be considered a representation of verbal behavior of teachers and students. Their list resulted in the development of a descriptive discursive system which includes a hierarchy starts by lesson and finished by act. Garfinkel (1967) adopted conversation analysis, an ethnomethodology approach (Sacks. et al, 1974) to analyze classroom interactions. With regard to turn taking in isolation, it was found that it represents a piece of discourse specific to the classroom context as it accounts for the coherent turns in it and shows that intervening turns are interdependent. Vine (2008) argues that the principles of conversation analysis should be applied alongside those of the sociocultural theory of learning when trying to understand classroom discourses. She urges that classroom discourse analysts regard learning as a socially constructed process and pay attention to the ways of organizing conversations and the role of institutional talk as they directly contribute to learning process and proper interaction in this specific context. Mehan (1979) and Schegloff (2001) also believe that what is named institutional discourse exemplified by classroom discourse is a world away from ordinary talk and should be understood and analyzed as a type of conversation, which enjoy a set of general patterns and structures make their analysis easier.

Considering the above mentioned studies, it seems that there is still more in the fragments of classroom discourse to account for. What is happening in classroom discourses in terms of contributing to the heterogeneous language knowledge and speaking abilities of students? Considering this issue, the study presents a critical investigation of discourses of students and teacher of a heterogeneous class which is supposed to be a good representation of the potential discourses of heterogeneous classes with similar statues at higher education in order to shed some light on discursive factors affect their heterogeneity. It should be mentioned that the term “*discourse*” in this article refers to the ways of constituting knowledge, along with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inherently exist in such knowledge’s and relations between them . Foucault believes that discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern (cited in Weedon, 1987). It is a form of power that circulates in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as those of resistance (Diamond and Quinby, 1988).

Theoretical frame work of the study

This study enjoyed Kumaravadivelu (1999) approach of critical classroom discourse analysis which had been developed based on Foucauldian post structuralism and Saidian post colonialism to transpire L2 classroom discourse. Foucault (1970, 1972) argues every utterance is controlled by the discursive field of power and knowledge. Power is not only manifested in top to down flow from upper to lower groups in any social order but also speared in the form of capillary action. Said (1978) also give new understanding of the colonial system by showing how it is made functional by making a discourse about others. Having analyzed orientalism based on the foucalt’s (1972) notion of inseparable existence of knowledge and power, he explained that text

produced by the by writers, legislators, artists, travelers, and colonial administrators accorded the authority posed by academic institutions thus creating a reality for the rulers which they seek to describe.

Kumaravadivelu (1999) criticized other approaches of critical classroom discourse analysis on account of having limited scope and methods of examination, which inevitably would lead to limited perspective on the issue. His proposed model is actually a three dimensional one which tries to capture the sociolinguistics, sociocultural and the sociopolitical perspectives of the discourse. Classroom discourse based on this model lends itself to multiple perspectives depending on the discourse participants' preconceived notions of what constitutes learning, teaching, and learning outcomes.

The proposed model of Kumaravadivelu (ibid) denotes that like all other kinds of discourses, classroom discourse is affected by a number of social, political and historical factors. A combination of the just mentioned factors and learning and teaching episodes motivate learners to bring their racialized and gendered experiences into the class environment. Classroom environments represents many levels of resistance, whether articulated or unarticulated, and therefore, it is necessary for any kind of classroom discourse analysis to focus on different forms of resistance and inequality and the ways they influence learning and teaching. Classroom discourse analysis should also take into account discourse participants' beliefs, identities and voices, and fears and anxieties. Considering the possible mismatches between intentions and interpretations of classroom aims and events, assessing of the extent to which critical engagement is facilitated in the classroom and theorizing what teachers practice and practicing what they theorize, thus contributing to the dismantling of the debilitating dichotomy between theorists and teachers, between producers and consumers of pedagogic knowledge are some other points he recommends paying attention in analyzing classroom discourse.

Methodology

This study examined the educational interactions and discourses of students and teacher at the class environment in order to shed some light on discursive factors contribute to the heterogeneity of students` English language knowledge. In doing that, a class of general English had been selected randomly at B.A level at Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran and examined thoroughly. The general English course was held in the fall of the 2014-2015 academic year. Overall, 45 students had been registered and attended the class for a term (a sixteen session long course). They fell under different fields namely; applied and sheer mathematics, nuclear and atomic physics, general and zoology biology and general statistics. 25 of students were male and the rest of them were female.

At the beginning of the term, two general English exams and an interview had been conducted to get as much information as possible about their level of English language knowledge. The first

written exam included 20 items which examined their knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and pragmatics. The questionnaire designed based on items` increasing level of difficulty and required students to check (make a mark) next to the answer to show that it was correct. Two researchers separately examined the written exam before using and inter rater agreement for rating questions was determined. Agreement on the measure was nearly 100 percent. Based on their comments those got 16 or more correct answers could be regarded advanced level students. Getting the score of 10-15 right answers denoted the intermediate level of examinees and answering 1-9 questions correctly means they were at beginner level. The second exam investigated their writing proficiency. Based on the title of the exam they were required to choose a topic from the list they were given (the list also arranged based on the presumed increasing level of difficulty) and write at least 10 lines about that. Based on the views of researchers, their selected topics, consistency and accuracy reflected their approximate level of proficiency in English.

Semi structured interview had also been conducted to get some knowledge of their speaking ability. This was also based on gradual movement from simple to more difficult questions and verifications of two researchers. The average time of interviewing each student was 10 minutes. Students were then rated based on the scores of the three just mentioned exams. Surprisingly, there was an agreement between students` scores gained from three exams, so that, those who were placed at the advanced level based on the results of the first exam got also highest scores in writing and speaking. In sum, results of the exams indicated that out of 45 students 6 were advanced level, 23 were intermediate level and 16 could be regarded beginner students in terms of English knowledge.

In getting the required data for the study, the whole length of their class was observed and analyzed critically. Explanation and interpretation was carried out based on relevant theories of discourse analysis.

Results and discussion

With regard to the speaking abilities of students it was noticed that although all top students had the language ability of speaking in the second language, only one of them (a male one named X for convenience) used to communicate with the teacher through it. He almost did not have any interaction with other students and whenever he was asked to comment on something or to answer a question, he started speaking English. Having noticed this, and being aware of the very fact that a one term course is not long enough to remove the existing speaking ability distance among students, the most reasonable thing to do was creating a condition in which at least all top students communicate in English and in this way motivate other students to lift their speaking abilities too. Addressing, asking and talking with students in English were among the things the teacher had done so many times. The result, however, was anything but the engagement of even

the few top students. Each or a combination of the following potential reasons may explain the above mentioned fact.

1. Severe resistance of most students for being exposed to English

Most students regarded speaking in English some sort of show off and whenever the teacher or the student talked with each other, they objected and said ironically for example “wow, how wonderful you are” Or “Does not your movie have subtitles”. The amount of criticize was so high that sometimes X gave up and became silent. This seems to be in line with Goffman’s (1985) notion of stigma where almost all students of the class tried to say X “there is something wrong with *you*. Try to be like us”.

2. Existence of the belief that passing the general English course does not require being able to speak in it

This seems to be the result of educational policy and mandated curriculum which often tells teachers what is and is not allowed in the classroom. ELT teachers of ministry of education of Iran, no matter whatever level they teach, should resort to such traditional teaching methods as Grammar Translation mainly because it is in line with the way students will finally be tested. In context of the study such students that only used English classes of their schools were completely detached from the culture of English language Canagarajah, (1993) and in the best case, were only able to remember some vocabularies and grammatical points. Their weakness even in literacy skills was so evident that sometimes they refused to read an exercise and answer it (as a part of the requirements of their class). In some other cases they feared that they will be the object of ridicule among their classmates. This points out to the fact that identity of students can be influenced by the type of curriculum they were taught based on. Identity is essentially a “social phenomenon” (Buckholtz & Hall, 2004) not only in the sense that one’s social interactions and discourses influence it but also in the sense that contexts, practices and policies construct that. To be more specific, whether someone is considered a “shy” or a “sociable” a “good” or a “weak” may result from the educational policy a country follow.

3. The idea that speaking in such environment will not help students` linguistic ability progression

Some top students rejected the proposal of speaking in English because they believed that they could not learn anything from other students. To be more specific, the class was so heterogeneous in terms of speaking ability that speeches of higher level students were not understandable to those of lower level and those of the lower level students did not have anything to help them progress linguistically. The solution may be in grouping students in a way that in each group a number of students are similar or a little different work with each other.

Using groups in which there are one or two higher level student (s) may also be of beneficence in that it can give higher level students more confidence and provide lower level one a good source of knowledge in addition to their teachers. Nunan (1998) believes that two way tasks (that encourage group work and interaction) have learners move their linguistic knowledge and push it to the limit. Positive interdependence which can be developed as a result of group work prepares learners to be effective participants not only in their classroom environment today, but also in their work place tomorrow. Group work activities can help learners explore the ways to use power of cooperation. It can also recommend a constructivism view of knowledge making. Enhancement of learners' cognitive growth (Murray, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978), motivation (Dorneyie & Csizer, 1998), interaction (brown, 2000) are among other benefits of paying attention to positive interdependence. Proponents of social learning theory also emphasize the importance of seeing and imitating behavior and statements of other people in one's behavioral development.

4. Teacher`s cease to use English upon seeing students reluctance to use it

The issue of power relation in the class the study focused on was an interesting one. At the beginning of the course the teacher selected a course book that was a little beyond their present level of knowledge (in accordance with Krashen`s (1977) i+1 notion) but latter on as she saw the reluctance and weakness of students to follow it she gave up her ideals to move forward a unified and heterogeneous class and set aside some useful parts of each unit including the speaking activities. One can infer that students' resistance and reluctance compelled their teacher to give up. Then, power may also flow from lower level parts of the society to the higher level, which in this case had a negative effect on their knowledge achievement.

Teacher as the single authority of the class could play an important role in making students involved and interested in English in general and speaking in particular. As far as developing speaking abilities of a heterogeneous class is concerned teachers can do different things. Devoting some time of the class to practice of English speaking (e.g., introducing yourself, talking about your family members, their jobs and so on), having students do the possible speaking activities of their books, using short and interesting listening extracts from different sources, having students repeat or sometimes summarize what their teacher or classmates says in English are among the activities to engage lower level students. Higher level students can take be regarded assistance of teachers in doing each of this ation.

As far as creating a facilitative learning condition for developing language abilities was concerned the teacher tried out her power and used three options which were the realization of her power in an ascendant order and apparently the last one was more useful than others. She frequently invited students take part in classroom discussion which mainly targeted the linguistic and non-linguistic points covered in their course book. Discussion for the linguistic items

involved posing some questions and having students work on it (even collaboratively) and answer them. For the nonlinguistic items, however, discussion commenting on some social and cultural issues referred to in each unit. The main purpose governed discussion section was avoidance of having a traditional teacher fronted classroom and providing students with meaningful learning condition. This surprisingly resulted in a good participation of students mostly when pragmatics and social issues were concerned. Students welcomed opportunities provided them with the chance of expressing their own thoughts, customs and cultures. The way they interacted including the ways of addressing, persuading and challenging each other was a clear reflection of different cultures they belonged to. For example, some of them expressed their challenging and opposite ideas irrespective of the effect it could have on others but some others were more conservative. Vygotsky (1978) believes that communicative events are shaped by cultural and historical factors, and thinking, learning and development cannot be understood without taking account of the intrinsically social and communicative nature of human life. Discussion of the linguistic points could involve only the minority group of students who had a pretty good background of English language. Other students preferred to remain silent even when they did not get a point although the teacher sincerely welcomed any possible question.

As a part of the requirements of the class and their homework, students were required to do all the activities of each units except those they were told to ignore. Although majority of the students did the activities on account of fear of losing some grades, the better solution was probably having them do them in the classroom environment and checking them in terms of accuracy, because there existed some contradiction between students` current level of knowledge and the perfect and faultless answers they wrote, which bring the idea into the mind that they just copied the right answers. Another solution might be asking them justify their answers at the time of answering each question. The last idea to heighten the linguistic knowledge of students was taking some written exams. Students of the study took part into two exams; midterm and final exam. Although the number and the general nature of them was pretty similar to each other, their difficulty level was not the same. Comparing the results of these exams one could clearly see quite a difference in their scores. It can be understood then that having more exams can mitigate the present distance between students` level of linguistic knowledge.

Conclusion

According to the results of the study the main issue with regard to making a class homogeneous in terms of linguistic ability is the issue of teacher. Where the power is exercised at its maximum level (the written exams) students had higher achievement. With regard to speaking ability, however, a combination of factors including power of teacher, educational policies and identity of students is at work.

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