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DISCURSIVE ENACTMENT OF POWER IN IRANIAN MEDICAL ESP CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT



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According to more recent critical teaching methods and approaches, over emphasis on teacher dominance in language learning settings is a doubtful pedagogical practice. Although critical pedagogy has sought to establish a more equitable and dialogical teacher-student partnership and change the excising oppressive conditions of the language learning contexts, its claimed potential has met limited practical utility. Drawing on Fair clough's approach to critical discourse analysis, the present study explored the discursive features of unequal power relations in Iranian medical ESP classes. The findings obtained through classroom observations and field notes show that the teachers played a disproportionately dominant role in the classes which was enacted by the use of a range of discursive strategies such as maximizing teacher-controlled talking time, turn-taking, topic control, modes of meaning-construction, and elicitation strategies. The findings of this study are expected to provide critical and emancipatory insights into ESL/EFL classroom practice and contribute to the transformation of its status quo.

**Keywords:** power relations, classroom discourse, CDA, ESP

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1. INTRODUCTION

Some of the critical theories of education put emphasis on that teachers' dominance in educational settings as an unfair educational practice. Contrary to the "banking model" of education in which students are kept as passive recipients of the content narrated by the teacher, Freire's (1970) Critical Pedagogy (CP) advocated a problem-posing model of education that claimed to create an on-going dialogical partnership between the teacher and students so that the latter not only read the word through interaction but also learned to read the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). The role of CP in educational environments, including in ELT contexts, may be seen as emancipatory in that the introduction of any transformation in apparently oppressive conditions is bound to change the power relations of the ESL/EFL classroom in favour of the learner (Giroux, 1988; Pennycook, 1990; Shor, 1996), perhaps via "re-distribution and sharing of power and representation" (Normazidah Che Musa, Koo Yew Lie & Hazita Azman, 2012, p. 44). Nevertheless, regardless of its claimed potential in bringing change to conventional educational settings, only the theoretical aspects of CP have been considered and it has rarely been applied to ELT classrooms (Canagarajah, 2005).

What is needed is perhaps an explication of the dialectic between theory and practice through a principled analysis of classroom practices (Kumaravadivelu, 1999), which would provide the teacher with a critical awareness of how the interplay of power relations in classroom interactions can promote or prevent learner empowerment. Such a need seems imperative because it has the potential to link the largely theoretical orientations of CP with the practical, transformative goals of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a multidisciplinary approach to analysing classroom discourse as well as to addressing social problems (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). In CDA methodology which is mainly associated with Fairclough, discourse is perceived as a social practice that is in a dialectical relationship with its context (Fairclough, 2001). According to Van Dijk (2001) CDA challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions of discursive events in different social practices and thereby attempts to reveal the role of discourse in reproducing and maintaining the existing power structures of social life.

Fairclough's three-dimensional framework (1992; 2001; 2003) consist of three layers of analysis: in text analysis, discourse practice analysis, and social practice analysis. In text analysis is defined as a description of the text's linguistic features. Fairclough (2003) believes that textual analysis is limited in that it focuses on just a selected few features of texts (in qualitative research) or many features simultaneously by 'quantitative analysis. Discourse practice analysis focuses on interpreting the discursive strategies used in producing and interpreting text and links the other two layers. Finally, social practice analysis involves the explanation of the relationship between the text and its context of situation, context of institution, and context of society. At this stage, the findings of the text analysis and those of the discursive practice analysis are explained in relation to the social context in which the text is embedded, including the socio-cultural and institutional forces which shape the discourse. Such forces are sometimes described as ideological and hegemonic (Fairclough, 2001).

## **2. Background of the study**

More recent language teaching methods and approaches advocate the development, promotion, and practice of autonomy and autonomous learning in language learning settings (Tuder, 1996). Nonetheless, this is more easily said than done. More conventional teacher-fronted EFL classes that employ the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern of classroom interaction still prevail in numerous educational settings worldwide (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Mehan, 1979; Lemke, 1990). This dominant classroom pattern is criticized for its almost forced elicitation of students' limited responses to the teacher's interactional turns of initiation and feedback (evaluation) moves. Therefore, the IRF cycle to a large extent allows teachers in many parts of the world to "continue to use [such] interactional sequences and strategies that keep them in control of the flow of dialog" (Sawyer, 2004, p. 190).

Despite the implementation of the CLT approach with its emphasis on the learner centeredness in the majority of Iranian language learning contexts, most EFL teachers continue to dominate their classes. The trend lives on regardless of research findings that indicate that unequal teacher-student power relations in teacher-fronted classes have negative consequences for the outcomes of language learning (Idris Aman & Rosniah Mustafa, 2006; Bailey & Cervero, 1998; Pace & Hemmings, 2007; Walsh, 2008).

Though not problematic in nature, teacher-frontedness becomes a problem in language learning settings as soon as the teacher's dominance consumes much of the learning/teaching classroom process so that the learners' active involvement becomes harmfully limited. Such a limitation is usually imposed on the learners by constraining their contribution as discourse participants in terms of their rights about what to say, what not to say, when to talk, and how much to get involved in the classroom. According to Nunan (1993) such classroom discourse includes unequal teacher-student power relationships in terms of nominating topics and turn taking. As mentioned elsewhere, while the literature in the field on the mediating role of discourse in institutional power enactment has been mounting steadily, EFL classrooms as educational institutions, however, have fairly recently been addressed. Van Dijk (2001) correctly points out that despite much work on classroom dialogues, little specific attention is paid to the routine enactments of institutional power. Besides, most of the available studies, have generally been conducted in Western countries (Kiany & Shayestefar, 2010). Put otherwise, few, if any significant studies on the discoursal aspects of power relations in high school EFL classrooms has been reported from Iran to date.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Objectives of the study and research questions**

To identify the existing power structure in the teacher-student interactions of university ESP classrooms, the present study intended to systematically examine the traces of unequal power relations in the classroom. It is assumed that the study provides insights for language teachers and educators about the power asymmetries in EFL classroom discourse. The findings can consequently contribute to the improvement and transformation of the largely oppressive situation of EFL classrooms in countries such as Iran. The pre-specified objectives were formulated in to the following research questions:

1. How power relations are enacted and reproduced in Iranian university ESP classrooms?
2. What discursive strategies are employed by teachers in teacher-student interactions in Iranian university ESP classrooms, and with what effect on students' voices?

#### **3.2. The participants**

The study favoured from 93, female students enrolled in ESP courses at the Zahedan University of medical sciences. The purpose of choosing the participants from this university is that the university is located in a small city which increases the chances of practicing more conventional teaching methods and approaches in the ESP classes. As shown in Table 1, both classes are similar in terms of class size and students' gender, but differ with respect to the teacher's gender and educational qualification.

Table 1. General classroom features

Class	N	Gender	Teacher's Gender	Teacher's Qualification
A	50	Male	Male	PHD
B	43	Female	Female	PHD

#### **3.3. Instruments**

The study used a camera recorder accompanied by field notes to record the teacher-student interactions.

#### **3.4. Data collection procedure and data analysis**

The data for the qualitative study were collected through the observation of naturalistic classroom lessons. In the first stage, the teacher-student interactions of an entire 90-minute lesson in each classroom were observed and video-taped and accompanied by field notes. In the next stage, the classroom verbal and non-verbal interactions were transcribed. Then, the transcripts were analysed to describe, interpret, and explain the classroom processes and the teacher-student discursive practices. The videos were replayed several times during the analysis of the field notes to facilitate interpreting them. To assure the precision of researcher's interpretation about the discursive strategies that the learners employed during the classroom lessons, the teachers and some of the students in both classrooms were asked to come in for an interview and talk about them. The data analysis were complemented with commentary for a discussion of the issues. The following set of transcript notation was used in the text analysis:

- T: Teacher
- S: Student
- Ss: Students
- [ : Interruption
- ...: Pause
- ( ): Undistinguishable talk
- ↗: Rising intonation

### **4. Results and Discussion**

The findings collected through analysing the classroom interaction transcripts and field notes generally point to the teachers' enactment of power by the use of a range of discursive strategies over their respective students. More specifically, the teachers in both classrooms dominated the talk time and turns and deployed a systematic use of imperatives and display questions that was evidence of their powerful positions

in the classroom discourse(see Seed house, 1996 for a discussion of the associations between the putative educating function of display questions in adult-child talk and the IRF cycle in language learning classrooms).

Another identified phenomenon which is an indicator of the powerful discourse participant's attempt to control the contributions of the less powerful other(s) in an interaction was labelled 'interrupting each other'. The students in both classes were hardly seen to interrupt their teachers' talk but the latter frequently interrupted their interlocutors. Another important feature of both classroom discourses was the teachers' elicitation strategy which dominated most of the class time. Table 2 illustrates the frequency and percentage of different discursive practices used in each classroom.

Table 2: Frequency of selected discursive practices in the EFL classroom

Class	Teacher turns (%)	Student turns (%)	Teacher interrupting students (f)	Student(s) interrupting teacher (f)	Teacher questioning students (f)	Student(s) questioning teacher (f)
A	84.2	55	27	21	90	5
B	73	61.5	35	14	101	7

f = frequency of occurrence

% = percentage of total no. of speaking turns observed

#### 4.1. Text analysis

Educational settings authorize the teacher to plan, control, and practice the classroom tasks and activities and hold them responsible for it. This is often completed more than anything through what might be termed "power behind discourse"(Fairclough, 2001).The resultant teacher-student asymmetrical power relations may be reflected in various aspects of classroom discourse such as teacher talking time, turn-taking system, distribution of modes of meaning, elicitation strategies, and topic control. Based on the findings of the present study, "interruption", "control of topic" and "enforcing explicitness" were the identified rhetorical acts which the teachers, as more powerful participants used to set constraints on the less powerful ones (students).

#### 4.2. Teacher talking time

As stated elsewhere, the IRF pattern as a classroom activity is still prevailing in most Iranian language learning and educational settings. Likely, The IRF pattern of classroom interaction was seen to be dominant in both of the classrooms under study. Since the initiation move of the IRF was always used by the teacher and included information, direction, or elicitation acts, it usually took up much more time than the subsequent (response) move by the students. Extract 1 of the classroom transcripts shows the lengthy teachers' talking time in comparison with the students' rather short one- or two-word contributions, a discourse of participation that may have become naturalized in the present EFL context (Holliday, 1997).

##### Extract 1

Class A:

T: Do you think that the banana plant is beneficial to us?  
 Ss: Humming  
 T: Do you?  
 Ss: ...Yes.  
 T: Can anyone talk about them?  
 Ss: For eating  
 T: Yes, that's a good one.  
 T: Anymore?  
 Ss: Medical practice.  
 T: Very well done. Anything else mentioned in the reading?  
 Ss: ...Yes  
 T: Come on everyone. Anything mentioned in the reading?  
 Ss: Yes

Class B:

T: Ok. You in red please. Do you like comic?

Sevda: Comic

T: [Do you enjoy reading, watching, listening to funny stuff?

Sevda: Not a lot

T: Ok. So you don't like it? Why?

Sevda: Not good

T: You don't like it much because it is not enjoyable for you.

T: Ms Haghgoo. How about you?

Saghar: Me

T: [Exactly, what do you think about comic?

T: You agree with Sevda?

Saghar: No

#### **4.3. Turn-taking**

The way a person chooses his or her next interlocutor is one of the means of enacting power in conversational interaction(Young, 2008). More specifically, "in dialogue between unequals (the two interlocutors are not equal in status), turn-taking rights are unequal" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 153). According to Fairclough (1992), the dominating phenomenon in turn-taking is normally found in institutions that involve the professional, the "insider", or "gatekeeper" interacting with the "public", "client", "outsider", or student. The following examples in Extract 2 help us better understand the teachers' domination in turn taking in the discourse of most language learning settings in Iran. The IRE pattern of classroom interaction seems to necessarily lead to the teachers' turns being almost twice as many the students' turns and thus hindering possible student participation (Tatar, 2005).

#### **Extract 2**

Class A:

T: Those day dreaming at the back of the class! Listen carefully. What is the women in the picture wearing?

Akbar: Red coat

T: Red coat.

T: Very well.

T: What else?

Sina: Umbrella

T: No

T: What is she wearing?

T: What has she put on?

Mina: Jeans.

T:That's it

T: She is wearing jeans

T: Anything else?

S: Shoes.

Saman: Yes, and a Scarf.

Class B:

T: Everyone look at the pictures carefully.

T: Can anyone guess where is she sitting?

Roham: In the park.  
 T: Perhaps  
 T: How come?  
 T: How did you find out?  
 Samin: it has trees and grass.  
 T: Good  
 T: Parks are full of trees and grass  
 T: They are green with plants.

#### **4.4. Modes of meaning**

Halliday (1994) asserts that meaning is constructed in three modes or met functions in any discursive event. The interpersonal metafunction shapes the social relationships by the declarative (statement), interrogative (question), and imperative(command) systems of mood and modality. The ideational metafunction forms ideas and experiences of the world through different processes of verbal groups (i.e. the transitivity system of language).The textual metafunction helps create textuality through system of theme/rheme relationships. According to Fairclough (2001), "Systematic asymmetries in the distribution of modes between participants are important per se in terms of participant relations: asking, be it for action or information, is generally apposition of power" (p. 105).

In the discursive practices of the investigated classes, the teachers' exercise of power over the students was identifiable through examining the met functions of language used by them. As evident from Extract 3, the teacher used the imperative mood frequently, the use of which is considered a way of (re)constructing an authoritative identity and asking the students to act accordingly.

#### **Extract 3**

Class A:

T: Listen! Open your books on page three. What do you see?  
 T: Laleh! Now tell me one of the new words you've just learned?  
 T: Don't stop. Keep reading.

Class B:

T: [Let her finish, then answer my question, ok?  
 T: You! Answer please.  
 T: Don't talk, please.  
 T: Start reading.

While observing the classes we encountered moments when the teachers strived for establishing their personal points of views regardless of their students' uncertainties; which is an indicator of the presence of power in discourse with respect to the ideational function. Consequently, the learners were hardly, if ever provided with the opportunity to comment on the topics raised by the teachers. At times, the students seemed puzzled by some of the teachers confusing questions and explanation. However, they did not seek clarification.

#### **Extract 4**

Class A:

T: Ok. Sara can you give an injection?  
 Sara: No  
 T: How about you Tannaz and you (pointing to another student)?  
 Tannaz: Me neither.

Samad: Nope

T: Akbar?

Akbar: of course not.

T: I think you all can. Provided that you have a needle and are educated and taught, and competent.

Class B:

T: Let's start our discussion by asking a few questions, shall we?

Ss: Yes

T: Am I loud and clear? Do you hear me well?

Ss: Yes

T: [Can you hear your friends?

Ss: Yes

T: [why? Because you have drums in your ears. Because they are working. Understood?

The language learners seem to have been puzzled about the question about being able to give an injection or not. It is unlikely that BA students have the necessary expertise and qualification for giving an injection. The teachers later emphasis on the students being able to give an injection provided that they have a needle confuses students even more. Learners who are not familiar with medical jargon may take the term as a 'sewing needle' and perceive that giving an injection is equal to poking someone with a sharp round pointed object such as a needle. The same is equally true for extract B.

#### **4.5. Interruption**

Continual interruptions were evident in the teachers' behaviour in both classes. They impatiently interrupted the students as soon as they paused to think or stopped to find the right words. Despite being frustrated, the language learners rarely interrupted the teacher. Interruption could be a sign of bad manners or impoliteness in ordinary conversational interaction on the part of the less powerful discourse participants. Nonetheless it is considered normal behaviour if performed by the more powerful participants like a teacher in a classroom as an apparently necessary strategy for classroom management. Discourse naturalization is the process through which some arbitrary ways of thinking or forms of behavior become natural or "common sense" (Fairclough, 2001) in favour of those in power (Briggs, 1992). Excerpt 5 is an example of the teacher interrupting the students:

#### **Extract 5.**

Class B:

T: Can anyone mention some of famous the holy saints in Iran?

Maryam: Astooneh.

T: [We will get to that later. (Pointing to another student) You!

Nasim: Shacheragh.

T: [more famous ones first.

Nima: Emam Reza

T: [yes, Emam Reza, Hazrateh Masume.

#### **4.6. Topic control**

Every institutional discourse setting imposes restrictions on the interlocutor's choice of language. Likely, participants in the EFL classroom are to a large extent restricted in their choice of language..., teachers largely control the topic of discussion" (Walsh, 2002 p. 4). A phenomenon that was evident from the findings of the present study is that the classroom exchanges were always changed by the teacher in every exchange of the interactions, often by raising new questions. At times, the teacher ignored the students' responses to the earlier questions, and did not seek any feedback in checking their understanding of the earlier stages of the interactions before moving to a new topic. Extract 6 illustrates how the teacher changed the topics of the exchanges.

**Extract 6**

Class B:

T: Are you fond of fruits?

Ss: Yes

T: Fruit?

Ss: Humming

T: Fruit?

Ss: (in Persian) "Miveh".

T: (while typing the word in to the laptop) Banana.

Ss: Banana

T: Let me see.

**4.7. Elicitation strategies**

Elicitation strategies are those techniques or activities which are used to elicit a response from the students. Questions (e.g. display and referential) are one of the most common types of elicitation strategies and a fundamental tool of teacher-learner classroom interaction. According to Long and Sato (1983), "display" and "referential" types of questioning are two of the most common elicitation techniques employed by EFL teachers. Display questions are usually used for comprehension check or confirmation, and are defined as "those questions for which the teacher readily knows the answers" (Luu & Nguyen, 2010, p. 33). "Referential" questions, on the other hand, "are the questions whose answers are not readily known by the teacher" (ibid.) and hence elicit longer, subjective and more meaningful answers. Referential questions are considered more genuine and providing more opportunities for communication in the language learning settings (see Seed house, 1996). A prominent feature of both classroom discourses in the present study was the infrequency of referential (open-ended) questions and over emphasis on display (closed) questions or limited-answer types which suppressed the students' meaningful participation in classroom activities. Moreover, the disproportionate use of known-answer questions failed to engage the students meaningfully, clearly stifling the potential development of students' intellectual activity and creativity in the long run. Extract 7 is an instance of the teachers' excessive use of display questions.

**Extract 7**

Class A:

T: Susan! Listen. How many people are in the picture?

Ss: Three

T: Do you like fruits?

Ss: Yes

T: What type of fruit?

Ss: Orange

T: Is this an orange?

Ss: No

T: What is it?

Ss: An apple

Class B:

T: Well everybody. Do you like getting an injection?

Ss: Yes

T: Does anybody like injections?

Ss: Of course not.

T: Ok

T: Does it hurt to have an injection?

Ss: So Much

T: When did you have an injection?

Ss: Humming

T: [when?

Ss: Last year

#### **4.8. Social practice analysis**

Although the rationale for teachers as power-holders in classrooms cannot always be considered negatively, the way teachers control classroom life impedes learners from developing an agentive role and taking responsibility for their own learning. Merely responding to the teachers questions in a superficial mechanical manner, does anything but result learner creativity and the development of autonomy among the students. This may be attributed to the teachers coming in to the class with a pre-specified lesson plan according to which they controlled the beginning, the orientation to the lesson, and the whole teaching process. A further justification could be the Washback effect which obliges teachers and students to act in line with the test requirements.

Evident from the extracts and aforementioned discussions, the classrooms under study were typical conventional teacher fronted classes which are further influenced and shaped by the wider institutional and social forces. Similar to what was probably going on at the time in numerous educational systems around the world, teachers in Iranian educational settings were given the “right” to assume responsibility in the classroom; whereas students were expected to do as they were told within the regulative/instructional binary of pedagogic discourse “as the rule which embeds a discourse of competence into a discourse of social order in such a way that the latter always dominates the former” (Bernstein, 1990, p.183). According to Fairclough (1992), the socio-political ideologies of power hierarchy in education underlie classroom discourse. Discourse mediates between social events and social structures which can function hegemonic ally in manufacturing consent for particular positions of power (Gramsci, 1971). “Hegemony can be defined as the manner in which consent is garnered from the masses so that social relations based on domination appear to be normal and natural” (1971, as cited in Walsh, 2008, p. 64).

It seems as if the hegemony of such teacher-centred classrooms is (re)created through an unexpressed binary of powerful-powerless relation between the teacher and the students for the putative preservation of acceptable classroom culture, that is, assigning a passive role to learners instead of perceiving them as (co-)producers of knowledge (see e.g. Levin, 2000; Watts, 2007). Such an arrangement is an indication of a fairly inherent agreement between teachers and students for preserving the current situation of institutional compliance which is defined by Freire (1973) as a “state of oppression which gratifies the oppressors” (p. 17). Likely, in stressing the role of the social use of language in sustaining repressive power relations in education systems and other social structures, Abdullah (2008) refers to “Bourdieu’s conception of linguistic habitus” which through subjective socialization could lead to a state of “symbolic violence” (p.79). As a consequence of symbolic violence, that is “domination through language”, those with subordinate positions are kept or keep silent (Bourdieu, 1987).

In both of the present observed classes, the teacher initiated the discussions and thereby restricted the learners in their choice of language. With respect to the fact that the majority of Iranian EFL teachers are incapable of representing themselves fully in English, the current situation could be taken as an instance of oppression. Despite the assumptions of critical pedagogy which emphasize the pedagogical value of the L1 as well as the L2, teachers, stakeholders, and even parents expected and at times pushed the students to communicate only in English.

The passive role of the students in discursive events was another feature of the investigated classes. The majority of them preferred to stay quiet unless addressed by the teacher. According to Fairclough (2001), the less powerful members usually use silence as a tool to be noncommittal about what the more powerful participants say, nonetheless those in power use strategies in the form of asking questions to break the silence of the less powerful ones. In the present study, the teachers ended most of their statements with such discourse boundary markers such as “yes?”, “ok?” or “ha?” They used them with rising intonation to elicit

students' confirmation. Such discourse markers accompanied by rising intonation are, according to Othman (2010), response elicitors (see Extract 8below).

#### **Extract 8**

T: Does anyone like ↗ injections?

Ss: No

T: [why? Because it hurts. Because it is painful. ↗ Right?]

#### **5. Conclusion**

A conclusion drawn from the findings of the present study obtained from applying a CDA framework to the investigation of the nature and representation of the existing social structure in teacher-student power relations in two Iranian medical ESP classes is that the teacher-student power relations in the observed EFL classrooms were unequal and in favour of the teachers who controlled the classroom discourse. The teachers' dominance was mainly expressed in asymmetrical distribution of talk time, turn-taking and elicitation strategies which were appropriated discursively. The power of the teachers over the irrespective classes of students in every aspect of the teaching/learning process was also realized through the modes of meaning construction through the ideational, interpersonal and textual meta functions. Further inspections revealed that the employed discursive strategies served as tools for establishing dominance. The teachers almost never tried to increase the level of the student's motivation. Neither did they assign agentive roles to their students or advocated autonomous learning.

The observations further point to the presence of silence in the classes as an unnatural factor. Learners were unwilling to respond to the teachers questions and preferred to stay reticent during the whole session. According to the tenants of critical pedagogy, silence can be an indicator of the participants' reluctance to involve in class activities in opposition to the forces they feel emanating from their teachers. Hence, the students' noncommittal classroom behaviours may be construed as signs of resistance and unheard voices against the boring and repressive classroom conditions experienced by them (Canagarajah, 2005; Fairclough, 2001; Shor, 2000).

With respect to the learners' very limited involvement in the classroom interactions, the researchers were unable to deal comprehensively with the students' discursive practices. The findings indicate that the exercise of power is a potentially dialectic phenomenon in any socio-political context including the language learning classroom. Conducting further longitudinal studies in different contexts using the ethnographic approach may yield different results.

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