

Exploring Dialogism and Multivocality in L2 Classroom-Discourse Architecture in Iran

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Abstract

Critical pedagogy (CP), as a poststructuralist educational movement, challenges the asymmetrical, power-over nature of classroom discourse and seeks to accommodate multivocality in the classroom and in the society. This study probed the discourse architecture of EFL classrooms in Iran. Specifically, it aimed to explore to what extent Iranian EFL classrooms have stepped away from the teacher-dominant initiation-response-follow-up (IRF) discourse structure and welcomed CP-oriented dialogism and multivocality. To this end, a number of EFL classrooms in Isfahan and Shahrekord (Iran) were observed, and the running classroom discourse was audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The results showed that discourse-construction opportunities were distributed unevenly in favor of teachers regarded as the sole authority in the classroom. Student-regulated symmetrical talks were seldom evidenced in the classrooms. The findings further demonstrated that the power-over IRF discourse architecture, despite its communicative inadequacies, still seems to be dominant in EFL classrooms in Iran. Finally, it is suggested that L2 practitioners should move towards transforming the status quo, include more elements of CP into L2 classrooms, and invest in dialogism and multivocality as essential mechanisms to de-silence the students.

Keywords: critical pedagogy (CP), initiation-response-follow-up (IRF) discourse architecture, dialogism, multivocality, transmission-oriented pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Critical theory originates in a postmodernist trend in philosophy and sociology that essentially aspired to transform unjust, oppressive relations of power (through challenging the status quo) with the ultimate aim of establishing new social arrangements and new self-hood within an egalitarian, just society. Critical theory has recently found its way to the literacy and education (Miedema & Wardekker, 1999) where it becomes committed to reshape local settings and discourses in the interests of marginalized groups of learners who are deprived of (equal) access to the opportunities and discourses of the dominant economies and cultures (Canagarajah, 2005; Luke, 1988). Critical pedagogy (CP), introduced by Freire in 1960s, aims to provide intellectual and epistemological mechanisms essential for huge transformation to occur within the individual and in the society at large through education, with the eventual aim of creating not only a better learning environment but also a better social world (Norton & Toohey, 2004; Popkewitz & Fendler, 1999). CP is concerned with power, social equality, social change, justice, culture, hegemony, ideology, and identity transformation in and through pedagogical discourses (Akbari, 2008; Boyce, 1996; Giroux, 1998; McLaren, 1989; Popkewitz & Fendler, 1999). CP-oriented educationalists are highly critical of the status quo of the current traditionally-oriented, teacher-fronted power-over classrooms and explore the ways in which educational practices and discourses may contribute to patriarchal, hierarchical, and dominating practices in wider societies (Popkewitz & Fendler, 1999). Schools, in the first place, are thus charged to empower the students to be critical social beings constantly questioning the givens (Cazden & Beck, 2003).

In a similar manner, critical approaches to second or foreign language (L2) education are interested in bringing about social transformation through the process of language teaching and learning. The discourse of CP in L2 education is thus the discourse of liberation (from the accepted power relations and social constraints) and hope (for improving the social conditions) (Akbari, 2008). From a CP perspective, L2 classroom discourse should empower and legitimize the voices of marginalized practitioners and learners and give them scope to exercise power in their local contexts. Practitioners may be marginalized in transmission-oriented educational contexts where, according to Kumaravadivelu (2006), their primary role in classrooms is to act as a

conduit, transmitting the professional knowledge base to students. On the other hand, L2 learners are disempowered when an educational system (or a teacher) minimizes their roles to just passive recipients of the base knowledge or assigns them no major roles in classroom discourse presided over by the teacher. Here is where CP comes into play and seeks to develop the individuals' critical language awareness by unraveling the hidden connections between (the micro) classroom-discourse structure and (the macro) social or power structure (Reagan & Osborn, 2002) and empower them to resist and question the status quo (Shore, 1992). This level of critical awareness comes to fruition when classroom co-participants recognize the necessity of going beyond arbitrary institutional and social constraints and engage in symmetrical, critical negotiation for meaning and discourse co-construction within L2 classrooms.

This study focuses on the conventional L2 classroom-discourse architecture in Iran and explores the dominant discourse structure and the underlying power and access relations. The findings, it is hoped, can be of great significance to the rationality and literature that have motivated the emergence of CP in the world at large and can shed light on one crucial facet of L2 education system within the country: Who owns classroom discourse (in EFL classes) in Iran?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The recent decades of language learning and teaching have shown a growing interest in CP in both ESL and EFL contexts. CP is a practice-oriented approach to L2 education motivated by a different attitude towards classroom and society with the aim to change not only the learning environment but also the society (Pennycook, 1990). Historically, CP is seen as the realization of *critical theory* of the Frankfurt School in schools (Gur-Ze'ev, 1998; Lather, 1998; McLaren, 2003). Freirean-based CP argues that the process of schooling withholds opportunities for students to have their own ideas and voices, and it would de-skill and silence them (Apple, 1982; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2004). CP-oriented education deals not just with knowledge or skills-training at micro level (like traditional transmission-model education), but what is of crucial importance to CP is autonomy, reflectivity, emancipation, social transformation, or education in the broader sense (Gur-Ze'ev, 1998).

CP, therefore, criticizes and challenges traditional pedagogy, in which the teacher "lectures" and the students "receive, memorize, and repeat" (Freire, 1972, p. 58). In traditional pedagogy, "the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing; the teacher thinks and the students are taught about; the teacher talks and the students listen meekly" (Freire, 1972, pp. 46-47). The teacher who is the subject of learning process chooses the content of knowledge, while the students are just objects who should follow the path paved by the teacher (Freire, 1972). Freire (1972) refers to transmission-oriented pedagogy as the *banking model of education* which evokes an act of depositing in which a teacher (the depositor) intactly transmits the base knowledge into the minds of students (the depositories). Banking model of education envisions the teacher always in the front of the classroom conducting the classroom discourse leaving little room for the students to have their voice (Bartolome, 1994, cited in Crooks & Lehner, 1998). This mainly teacher-fronted, authoritative approach encourages only students' passivity, silence, obedience, and disempowerment, and, in many cases, stifles their self-reflexivity and critical awareness or thinking (Alford, 2001; Freire & Macedo, 2003; Ranson, 2000).

CP is recognized with some key concepts, such as conscientization, problem-posing, praxis, critical thinking and reading, identity transformation, learner autonomy, and humanization (Freire, 1972). One important concept in CP is *dialectics* or *dialogical method*. Dialectics is intrinsic to the process of cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1987), in the sense of interaction between communicative activity and psychological processes (such as voluntary memory and thinking), on one hand, and between human beings and others or nature, on the other. Furthermore, human beings are humanized in dialogues which are quintessential for their social life. Dialogue as a horizontal relationship (between equals rather than superiors and inferiors) is an integral aspect of CP (Freire, 1972; Shore & Freire, 1987), since without dialogue there can be no communication and without communication "there can be no real education" (Freire, 1972. p. 65). Therefore, to create classroom participation and action and to enhance opportunities for learning, encouraging student talk and peer and group discussion among students seems vital. The students can go beyond the boundaries of traditional routines of classroom and engage in dialogic interaction in which knowledge is collaboratively constructed, leading to the construction of

meaningful discourse and creative thinking and learning (Barnes & Todd, 1995).

Cazden (2001) makes an explicit contrast between traditional and non-traditional classroom discourse. Traditional classroom discourse refers to a sequentially tripartite discourse structure: *teacher initiation*, *student response*, and *teacher follow-up* (IRF) (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1992). The forming of an IRF exchange, to a great extent, goes back to the behaviorist orientation to language learning. The teacher provides the stimulus, the learner supplies the response and then the teacher reinforces correct response positively or corrects the wrong response (Jia, 2005). It is a clichéd teacher-student speech exchange consisting of three moves of initiation, response, and follow-up in speaking or writing which seems to occupy the largest portion of the present language classroom discourse (Hsiao, 2005). Non-traditional discourse structure, on the other hand, encompasses a sequence of horizontal teacher-student or student-student talks and does not fit in an IRF structure due to the symmetry of relations that exists between the participants (Cazden, 2001). Proponents of CP (e.g., Freire, 1972; Girux, 1992; Luke, 1988; Luke & Gore, 1992; McLaren, 1989; Simon, 1992) believe that learning occurs when students are active participants in the classrooms and that traditional power-over relations in the classroom are counterproductive. They claim teachers should transfer part of their authority to students through more balanced, open, and dialogic discussion (Shore, 1992) to transform them into active social beings and cherish multivocality not only in education but also in the society (Canagarajah, 2005). It is emphasized that learners perceive classrooms as 'decontextualized' when their feelings, their beliefs about what is important, their reasoning, and their experience are not part of the assumed context of teacher's communication (Young, 1992).

Implementation of CP in any EFL context is of great importance and enlivens education to develop new ways of classroom practices. Missingham (2007), for example, employed several innovative strategies to engage university students in participatory and dialogic learning, negotiating the curriculum, making students experts, challenging them to develop their own theory, participatory games, theatre, and problem-posing education. He argued that the majority of students who received this way of learning and teaching reported that they learned a lot more from each other. Woods (2006) also found a high quality of work in peer or group student collaboration while teaching undergraduate classes. She showed that such group discussions encourage silent students to

contribute more to the debate, facilitate creativity in thinking, and initiate discussions with more extended, elaborate, and wide-ranging issues than those in conventional teacher-to-class interaction routines (Woods, 2006). Okazaki (2005) engaged ESL students in dialogue and writing tasks to examine social issues. He found that the dialogic problem-posing process served to maintain dialogues, raise students' critical awareness of the content of their talks, and promote international understanding and cultural tolerance. In sum, Waring (2009) considered how it would be possible to move out of IRF and establish a discourse structure that allows significant student-initiated negotiation moves. She found that adopting a dialogical discourse structure in which students can collaborate to evaluate issues or solve a problem is of paramount importance.

Although there have recently been significant attempts in favor of implementation of CP into classroom practices, most studies in classroom discourse analysis show that teachers still display absolute and power-over authority in classroom discourse (Hsiao, 2005; Mehan, 1979). For example, Dombey (2003) examined primary schools in particular and observed a trend of domination of teacher talk in which teachers acted as interrogators and pupils functioned as subjects of interrogations. In Taiwan, Hung (1999) focused on teaching procedures and types in two language classes (i.e., teacher-centered and student-centered) and found that, in the teacher-centered classes, most students remained passive waiting to be called or given a chance to interpret the texts (Hung, 1999). Research on classroom discourse architecture in British and American schools also showed that, despite considerable commitment to student participation, teachers still own most of the classroom discourse and that the classic IRF structure is still preferred in many cases (Comber, Galton, Hargreaves, Pell, & Wall, 1999). Teachers seem to propose all topics, initiate all exchanges, and seldom take the opportunities to expand on students' responses (Gamoran, Kacher, Nystrand, & Prendergast, 1997).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Considering the paucity of critical studies related to the most prevalent classroom-discourse architecture in Iran, this critical study sought to examine who really owns the classroom discourse in EFL classes in Iran. In practical terms, the study investigated whether the dominant discourse

structure is IRF-based or in any significant way influenced by CP-oriented dialogism and multivocality. It also addressed the issue if the current classroom discourse can endow the learners with a critical awareness to actively transform their learning processes and creatively engage in symmetrical, critical dialogues, and new knowledge co-construction. Therefore, the following research question was posed:

1. What is the dominant discourse structure of EFL classrooms in Iran's educational system?
2. To what extent have Iranian EFL classrooms incorporated elements of CP-oriented dialogism and multivocality in their discourse structures (and stepped away from IRF-based discourse models)?

METHOD

Participants

Ten EFL classrooms in public high schools in Isfahan and Shahrekord were observed. There were about 25 EFL students in each class. The students' ages ranged from 15 to 18, and they were all native speakers of Persian. Furthermore, the participants of the study also comprised 10 EFL teachers who were officially hired by the Ministry of Education. Of those teachers, eight had B.A. in English language Teaching, English Literature, or Translation and two held M.A. in teaching English as a Foreign Language. They were all native speakers of Persian, and their years of experience in teaching English in public schools ranged from 16 to 22.

Data Collection Procedure

After receiving official observation-permission from the Ministry of Education, one of the researchers attended ten random EFL classrooms in six public high schools in Isfahan and Shahrekord. Each class period took about 90 minutes long with the participants doing different classroom activities, such as checking assignments, teaching grammatical points, reading comprehension, teaching phonetics, vocabulary items, or conversations. The researcher carried out the observations sitting at the back of the classrooms from the beginning to the end of each session, observing, taking notes, audio-recording the discourse with no

intervention in the classroom processes and procedures. The spoken speech exchanges being made in the class were audio-recorded for later transcription and coding.

Data Analysis

The recorded teacher-student or student-student discourse exchanges in the classroom were transcribed and then coded based on the coding system given below. The dominant discourse structures were specified by counting the number of occurrences of each elicited discourse episodes (defined as any piece of discourse centering around one specific subject matter in the classroom). A Chi-square was also run to know whether there was a significant difference between the numbers of occurrences of different patterns. Table 1 displays the coding system used in transcribing and analyzing the classroom discourse patterns:

Table 1: The coding system

Code	Representation	Code	Representation
I	Teacher-initiation move	SS	Multiple students
T	Teacher	S ₁ , S ₂ , . . .	Single (different) students
SI	Student-initiation move	[]	Explanation (researcher) e.g., [silence]
R	Response move (student)	<i>Italics</i>	Words (or sentences) in textbooks.
TI.	Teacher's linguistic reply	. . .	Interruption (teacher or student)
F	Follow-up move	Interaction (or pattern) continued

RESULTS

As to the first research question, all the discourse exchange patterns that naturally occurred among the participants were transcribed and coded and the number of incidences and frequency percentages were computed for them. Table 2 shows the most frequently-observed discourse patterns in the classrooms. To examine whether there was a significant difference in the observed pattern frequencies, a chi-square test was run (Table 2). The chi-square results indicate that there was a significant difference in

terms of the number of discourse patterns that naturally occurred in the classrooms.

Table 2: The most frequently observed discourse patterns

Discourse Patterns	Percentage of Exchanges	Observed <i>N</i>	Expected <i>N</i>	Residual	Chi-Square	Asym p. Sig.
IRF	45%	213	157.6	55.4	2400.34	.000
IR	33.4%	158	157.6	0.4		
RF	21.6%	102	157.6	-55.6		
Total		473				

As shown in Table 2, the observed classroom-discourse structures were more in favor of the traditional IRF (45%) and IR (33.4%) structures indicating that the scepter of discourse power is practically in the hands of the teachers. Student-initiated discourse, or the RF structure, received the least frequency (21.6%). The imbalanced distribution of discourse moves and structures witnessed in the Iranian EFL classrooms was thus in accord with an IRF discourse architecture and reminiscent of a transmission-based model of L2 education.

Specifically, the following episodes portray the teacher-student discourse exchanges evidenced in the Iranian EFL classrooms, thereby addressing the second main concern of the study, that is, to what extent the explored classroom-discourse architecture displays elements of criticality, symmetry, and multivocality between the teacher and students.

Episode 1:

- (I) T: Okay, which page?
 (R) S₁: Page 96.
 (F) T: Page 96, Speaking 3.
 (I) I explain passive voice again. Look at the example *She washes the dishes every day*. Is this sentence active or passive?
 (R) SS: Active.
 (F) T: Yes,
 (I) We said that a sentence is active when it has what?
 (R) SS: Verb, subject, object
 (I) T: In order please.
 (R) SS: Subject, verb, and object.
 (F) T: We call a sentence active on the condition that it has subject, verb, object, and other parts such as adverbs of time, place, or manner. A

sentence is active when it has subject, therefore, this sentence is active because of *she. Washes* is the verb. . . .

(F) T: So, the passive sentence would be *The dishes are washed every day*.

As shown in the episode, the teacher initiates (and owns) most turns in the dialogue, and any student's response is interrupted or followed by the teacher's feedback or evaluation. The following episode (episode 3) depicts an exemplary IR structure, where teacher feedback is not given in the form of explicit prompts or explanations. Perhaps, there are covert feedback moves (e.g., nodding) after each response indicating the teacher's approval. This occurs especially when the students' responses are mostly correct. Even in line 8, when the student cannot give the correct answer the teacher does not provide feedback and repeats the initiation move instead in line 9. Therefore, line 9 may function not only as an initiation but also as one covert feedback leading the student to give a correct response.

Episode 2:

- (1) (I) T: Pronunciation practice, page 87. Listen and repeat chorally:
/i:/, /si:/, /gri:n/
(2) (R) SS: /i:/, /si:/, /gri:n/
(3) (I) T: /eI/, /seI/, /treI/, /greI/, /peI/
(4) (R) SS: /eI/, /seI/, /treI/, /greI/, /peI/
(5) (I) T: /aI/, /seI/, /traI/, /baI/, /paI/
(6) (R) SS: /aI/, /seI/, /traI/, /baI/, /paI/
(7) (I) T: Now, tell me the sound of /tI/. Sara.
(8) (R) S1: /i:/
(9) (I) T: /tI/?
(10) (R) S1: /I/
(11) (I) T: /paI/? Maryam.
(12) (R) S2: /aI/
(13) (F) T: Thanks.
-

Surprisingly, even the evidenced RF structures were never critical and essentially represented a dominant IRF discourse structure. No trace of self-reflexivity (or critical language awareness) is evident in the students' initiation of classroom discourse and the content of their talks resonates with the teacher's concern for transmitting the base knowledge.

Episode 3:

- (1) (SI) S1: May I answer?
 (2) (TR) T: Yeah. Write it on the board.
 (3) (R) S1: [She writes the answer on the board.]

Episode 4:

- (1) (I) T: Page 90, True or False.
 (2) (SI) S1: May I come?
 (3) (TR) T: No. Sara, you answer.
 (4) (SI) S2: Which page?
 (5) (R) TSS: Page 116.
 (6) (R) S2: *All birds travel at winter.* False.
 (7) (F) T: Yes, False. Continue.
 (8) (R) S2: *They fly to warmer places.* True.
 (9) (SI) Should I translate?
 (10) (TR) T: Yes.
 (11) (R) S2: [Translates it]
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In Episode 3, student 1 initiates the interaction (*May I answer?*). It led to the teacher's approval. But in Episode 4, the student's initiation received the teacher's negative response. In the same teacher's move, the teacher's power-over distribution of discourse-building moves is obvious when she calls someone else (*Sara*) to take the floor (line 3). Other students' initiations were not communicative in essence and just addressed the teacher's main concern for teaching the content. It is concluded that the discourse exchange structure of EFL classrooms in Iran seems to be overly controlled by the teacher teaching (or transmitting) the coursebook content, which, as a consequence, leaves insufficient room for symmetrical teacher-student and student-student partnerships and dialogism in shaping teaching-learning experiences. Classroom participants are far too much occupied with drills, exercises, and tests and thus run the risk of sacrificing multivocality and criticality in the long run.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study showed that the traditional IRF discourse structure, which by design serves a transmission model of education, was the dominant discourse structure in the Iranian EFL classrooms. In other words, the teacher, for the most part, initiated (and owned) the classroom

discourse through giving explanations or posing a question which was naturally followed by students' responses. Still, it was even the teacher who terminated the discourse-episodes by providing feedback. Other sporadic discourse structures turned out to be different versions or extensions of the same teacher-dominated IRF discourse structure. It was revealed that there was little room for the students' self-reflexive or self-initiated talks of personal, local, institutional, or social concerns. In fact, this is an obvious outcome for the tripartite teacher-initiated IRF discourse structure in which two moves are devoted to the teacher and only one move to all the students just to respond. According to Vaish (2008), it is this IRF that makes a class monologic with the teacher holding the floor for most of the time.

In the observed EFL classrooms, although a type of discourse was running, it was devoid of any meaningful dialogic teacher-student or student-student interaction. No real-life problem was posed to the class, and all the discourse was pinned down to grammar points or teaching the content of the textbook. Learners' were not engaged in repairing or rewording their own utterances and assisting each other to effectively express themselves. As noted earlier, the teacher mainly held the scepter of power over the asymmetrical distribution of discourse moves, and she decided who to talk and how much in the classroom. Therefore, no sign of multivocality or dialogical discourse structure was observed in the EFL classrooms. The sad story is when students cannot express themselves or their (dis)likes in the classroom, obviously, they cannot have any voice in the society, let alone resist what is imposed on them (Canagarajah, 2005). In such a passive authoritarian discourse, the oppressed marginalized learners, little by little, tend to ignore themselves, their capabilities, and knowledge, lose their joy of learning, and begin to become silent (Dewey, 1971; Freire, 1972; Shore, 1992). In contrast, when students face a dialogic teacher who always has an ear for their words, they will be courageous to express their thoughts, experiences, and knowledge (Shore, 1992).

In retrospect, the study showed that CP in terms of dialogism and multivocality, despite having many advantages and benefits, have yet not found a comfortable home in Iranian public schools. Teachers still adhere to the traditional top-down principles and try to transmit the recommended dosage of content knowledge represented in the book to the students, and students should merely absorb the knowledge. From a CP perspective, such schooling systems may be impediments to the

social and educational change and seem to be dehumanizing. Further, the 'conduit'-like educational approach (i.e., channeling the flow of information from the top of the educational spectrum to the bottom) cherished in such schools only creates the sense of dependency and a hierarchical understanding of authority in students and make them blindly accept all the taken-for-granted truths (Kumaravadivelu, 2003a, 2003b). This imbalanced focus on neutral, decontextualized lessons of the course books, therefore, raises almost no immediate sense of social awareness or critical consciousness to bring about their favorable social transformation to lessen their oppression in school and society at large (Eisner, 2002). In a similar vein, Freire (1972) points out that teacher-fronted discourse structure (typical of the banking model of education) encourages the oppressed students to develop a sense of silence, to be submissive, and to obey the dominant students or teachers and discourages students' questioning voice.

In sum, L2 teachers can, instead of teaching the book, incorporate themes from students' day-to-day lives to enable them to think about their situation and explore possibilities for change (Akbari, 2008). Clearly, as Sowden (2008) notes, if activities and topics of the class are of the type with which students can identify, they will invest more motivation in the negotiations and the English they learn is of more practical use to them. In the IRF-based classrooms, students' passive speech roles might be wrongly attributed to their limited language resources or knowledge, whereas such passivity and submissiveness is more linked to the lack of symmetrical interactional opportunities, which is a fundamental concern to CP.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

To conclude, the findings of the study showed that the investigated EFL classrooms seem not to be favorable to critical language learning and transformative pedagogy because the dominance of teachers' authority and control over the classroom discourse limits the students' criticality, self-reflexivity, and their creative knowledge co-construction. Therefore, it seems that the current L2 pedagogy follows some version of the traditional banking model of education (Freire, 1972) in which the students should accept what the authorities present, and as a result, *the culture of silence* will gradually dominate everywhere. In other words, the current EFL educational system seems to be falling into the trap of

silencing the students by impeding the positive processes of dialogism and multivocality in classrooms.

This study can raise L2 practitioners' awareness of the current EFL classroom discourse exchange because, according to Pennycook (1999), no change will occur unless people realize its necessity. The results of the study will benefit language teachers in becoming aware of what is going on in their classes, and therefore, recommend that they move away from a teacher-dominated mode of teaching to a more student-centered one. The outcome may be a call for reconsidering power relationships among EFL classroom participants (i.e., teacher and students) and the fact that teachers should no longer be considered the sole power and authority who know everything. In order to avoid teacher-fronted classrooms, teachers are suggested to transfer some of their authority to the students through more evenly balanced, open, and dialogic discussions instead of transferring their own knowledge and facts. In this context, students will find opportunities to have a voice and be involved, and hence, will be more motivated and interested in language learning. It thus seems advisable for L2 practitioners to move towards more inclusion of critical empowering pedagogy to de-silence the students and to encourage them to speak their minds in both the classroom and the society (Fairly, 2009).

Bio-data

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