

## **Discursive Enactment of Power In Iranian High School EFL Classrooms**

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### **Abstract**

Teachers' dominance in teaching environments has been criticized as an oppressive educational practice by critical theories of education. While critical pedagogy that espouses a problem-posing model of education has sought to promote a more equitable and dialogical teacher-student partnership and to transform the oppressive conditions of the ESL/EFL classroom, the claimed potential of the approach has had only limited success in practice. Drawing upon Fairclough's approach to critical discourse analysis to make for a principled analysis of EFL classroom practice, this study investigated the discursal features of unequal power relations in Iranian high school EFL classes. The data was collected via observation of two classrooms, one located in an urban area and the other in a semi-urban area of Iran. The analysis of the observation data, which included transcripts of classroom lessons as well as field notes, indicated that teachers played a disproportionately dominant role to the extent that the students were kept apparently passive and powerless via a range of discursive strategies including 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, critical discourse analysis, EFL learning.

### **Introduction**

Teachers' dominance in teaching environments has been criticized as an oppressive educational practice by critical theories of education (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1980; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2004). In opposing 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) espoused a problem-posing model of education that claimed to engender 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 tip the power relations of the ESL/EFL classroom in favor 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) However, despite its claimed potential in bringing change to traditional educational conditions, only the theoretical aspects of CP have been attended to and rarely has it been put into practice in ELT classrooms (Canagarajah, 2005).

Perhaps what is needed is an explication of the dialectic between theory and practice through a principled analysis of classroom practices (Kumaravadivelu, 1999), which would afford the teacher a critical awareness of how the interplay of power relations in classroom interactions can promote or pre-empt learner empowerment. Such a need would seem imperative in that it can link the largely theoretical orientations of CP with the practical, transformative goals of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a multidisciplinary approach to analyzing classroom discourse as well as to addressing social problems (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997).

CDA methodology, mainly associated with Fairclough's work, regards discourse as a social practice which is in a dialectical relationship with its context (Fairclough, 2001). Van Dijk (2001) notes that by challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions of discursive events in different social practices, CDA 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) points to three layers of analysis. In text analysis, which is a description of the text's linguistic features, Fairclough (2003) adopts a relational approach to maintain that “textual analysis can focus on just a selected few features of texts [in qualitative research] or many features simultaneously by ‘quantitative analysis’...” (p. 6). Discourse practice analysis, which concerns interpreting the discursive strategies used in producing and interpreting text, links the other two layers, text and social practice. 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).

### **Statement of the Problem**

In EFL contexts, learners are supposed to be assigned an active role in their learning process and in teaching/learning decision-making in contemporary language teaching approaches (Tuder, 1996). Nevertheless, the traditional teacher-fronted EFL classes that

employ the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern of classroom interaction (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) still seems to be dominant in many educational environments around the world (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. Hence, 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).

While the ELT program in Iranian high schools has been designed based on the CLT approach, most EFL teachers still dominate their classrooms. This is an irony as CLT focuses on learner-centeredness. Research shows that unequal teacher-student power relations in teacher-fronted classes tend to impact the outcomes of language learning in a negative way (Idris Aman & Rosniah Mustafa, 2006; Bailey & Cervero, 1998; Pace & Hemmings, 2007; Walsh, 2008)

Teacher-frontedness is seen as a problem in high school EFL classrooms because the teacher dominates much of the learning/teaching classroom process to the extent 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. Nunan (1993) says that such classroom discourse includes unequal teacher-student power relationships in terms of nominating topics and turn-taking. Hence, as noted in the foregoing sections, while the literature in the field on the mediating role of discourse in institutional power enactment has been increasing, EFL classrooms as educational institutions, however, have only been addressed in a limited way. Van Dijk (2001) rightly notes that despite much work on classroom dialogues, little specific attention is paid to the routine enactments of institutional power. The existing studies, too, have generally been conducted in Western countries (Kiany & Shayestefar, 2010), and no significant study on the discursal aspects of power relations in high school EFL classrooms has been reported from Iran to date.

## **Objectives of the Study**

In order to investigate the existing power structure in the teacher-student interactions of EFL classrooms, the present study attempted to systematically identify the traces of unequal power relations in the classroom. The following research questions were addressed:

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

The findings of this study are expected to provide insights to 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.

## Methodology

The data for the qualitative study were obtained from the observation of naturalistic classroom lessons. Using a convenience sampling procedure, two high school EFL classrooms from an urban and a semi-urban area of southern Iran were selected for the purpose of the present case study. As shown in Table 1, both classes are similar in terms of class size and students' gender, but are somewhat different with respect to the teacher's gender and educational qualification.

Table 1: General classroom features

Class	Geographical location	No. of students	Students' gender	Grade	Teacher's gender	Teacher's qualification
A	Semi-urban	22	Female	10	Female	MA (TEFL)
B	Urban	20	Female	10	Male	BA (TEFL)

## Procedures

First, the teacher-student interactions of an entire 50-minute lesson in each classroom were observed and video-taped, and field notes were taken in addition to the classroom observation. Then, the classroom verbal and non-verbal interactions were transcribed. The transcripts were next analyzed to describe, interpret, and explain (Fairclough, 2001) the classroom processes, the teacher-student discursive practices. The videos were also reviewed several times to assist in the analysis of the field notes. Both the teachers and some of the students in both classrooms were also consulted through unstructured interviews (informal conversations) to confirm the researcher's interpretation of the discursive strategies that they employed during the classroom lesson. 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

## Results and Discussion

The analyses of the classroom interaction transcripts and field notes generally showed the teachers' enactment of power via 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 Seedhouse, 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).

The interruption of the Other, as a sign of the powerful discourse participant's attempt to control the contributions of the less powerful participant in an interaction (cf. "power in discourse": Fairclough, 2001) was also an identified phenomenon in both classrooms, with the power enactment mainly effected, as it were, by the teachers. The students in both classrooms were rarely seen to interrupt their teachers' talk but the latter frequently interrupted their charges. Another significant feature of both classroom discourses was the teachers' elicitation strategy which dominated most of the class time. Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage of different discursive practices employed in the classrooms.

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	61	39	8	2	40	0
B	74.6	25.4	20	3	51	0

f = frequency of occurrence

% = percentage of total no. of speaking turns observed

## Text analysis (description)

Teachers are institutionally vested with the right to control and take charge of the classroom activities by virtue of what might be termed "power behind discourse" (Fairclough, 2001). The resultant teacher-student asymmetrical power relations may be realized in various aspects of classroom discourse (Cullen, 1998), including as Teacher talking time (Walsh, 2002), turn-taking system, distribution of modes of meaning, elicitation strategies, and topic control. The analysis of the present classroom interaction transcripts indicated the teachers' power enactment over the students in both the classrooms observed, in particular the use of "interruption", "topic control" and "enforcing explicitness" as rhetorical acts which they used as the more powerful participants placing constraints on the less powerful ones (Fairclough, 2001).

### Teacher talking time

The IRF pattern of classroom interaction was seen to be dominant in both 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. Excerpt 1 of the classroom transcripts shows the *excessive* teachers' talking time in comparison with the students' rather meager one- or two-word contributions, a discourse of participation that may have become naturalized (Holliday, 1997) in the present EFL context.

#### Excerpt 1

Class A:

- (47)T: Have you played with a toy car when you were a child?  
(48)Ss: Buzzing  
(49)T: Have you?  
(50)Ss: Yes.  
(51)T: What is it?  
(52)Ss: Toy plane.  
(53)T: Yes, toy plane.  
(54)T: What do people usually buy for children on their birthdays?  
(55)Ss: Toys.
- (67)T: Have you been on a merry-go-round when you were a child?  
(68)Ss: Yes.  
(69)T: Where can you find a merry-go-round? Where?  
(70)Ss: In a park.

Class B:

- (38) T: Ok. You please (pointing to another student) Do you sometimes travel?  
(39) S8: travel  
(40) T: [Do you sometimes go to another city?  
(41) S8: sometimes.  
(42) T: [Yes, sometimes. How do you travel? By what?  
(43) S8: Train.  
(44) T: By train, sometimes by bus, sometimes by car. Yes.  
(45) T (pointing to another student): You, what's your name, I forgot your name?  
(46) S9: Naseri.  
(47) T: Yes, Mis. Naseri can you make a table?  
(48) S9: No, I can't.

### Turn-taking

One of the ways through which power is usually enacted by a speaker in a conversational interaction is the way s/he selects the next speaker (Young, 2008). Fairclough notes that “in dialogue between unequal, turn-taking rights are unequal” (1992, p. 153). He adds that 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 Excerpt 2 aptly illustrate the teachers’ domination in turn-taking in the discourse of both classrooms. The IRE pattern of classroom interaction seems to necessarily lead to the teachers’ turns being almost twice as many the students’ turns (as also shown in Table 2) and thereby suppressing potential student participation (Tatar, 2005).

#### Excerpt 2

Class A:

- (3) T: Yellow group! Answer my question. What’s the meaning of “chaleh/godal”?
- (4) Ss: hole
- (5) T: hole, very good
- (6) T: “safinehe fazaei”?
- (7) Ss: Spaceship
- (8) T: Spaceship, very good
- (9) T: “sakhreh”
- (10) Ss: rock
- (11) T: rock, very good
- (12) T: “aks”?
- (13) Ss: picture
- (14) T: No, the new word we’ve learned for it.
- (15) Ss: Photo
- (16) T: right, photograph. Very good.

Class B:

- (54) T (pointing to another student): Now, you answer my question. Where do cars go?
- (55) S7: Go in the street.
- (56) T: Yes, cars go in the street.
- (57) T: Where do they move?
- (58) S5: On highways.
- (59) T: [They move on roads, ha, cars go on roads.]
- (60) T: What about boats? Where do boats move?
- (61) S3: Move on waters.
- (62) T: [Yes, boats and ships move on water. very good, yes. Ok,

## Modes of meaning

According to Halliday (1994), in any discursive event, meaning is constructed in three major modes or metafunctions. The interpersonal metafunction forms the social relationships through the declarative (statement), interrogative (question), and imperative (command) systems of mood and modality. The ideational metafunction constructs 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. As Fairclough (2001) avers, “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 a position of power” (p. 105).

In the discursive practices of both classrooms, the teachers' exercise of power over students could be traced through analyzing the metafunctions of language used by them. As shown in Excerpt 3, both classroom A and B teachers' frequent use of the imperative mood seemed to be a way of (re)constructing an authoritative identity and asking their students to act as they were expected.

### Excerpt 3

Class A:

- (3) T: Red group! Answer my question. What's the meaning of “chaleh/godal”?  
(169)T: Each group! Now tell me one of the new words you've just learned?  
(178): Now open your books.

Class B:

- (4) T: [First raise your hand, then answer my question, ok?  
(6) T: You! Answer please.  
(127) T: Stand up. Everybody, stand up (pointing to the class to look through the window). These are real cars, ha?  
(128) T: Sit down, please.

With respect to the ideational metafunction of teachers' language as a trace of power in discourse, we found some moments when the EFL teachers tried to establish their own points of view as the truth regardless of their students' possible reservations. Hence, the students were hardly provided with any opportunities for making/presenting their points on the topics raised by the teachers. Excerpt 4 shows examples of such classroom interaction. There were some moments when the teachers' points (questions) probably seemed nonsensical and confusing to the students. Even though some of the students looked confused about some of these points made by the teachers, they did not seek any clarification.

#### Excerpt 4

Class A:

- (47) T: Yes, Mis. Amiri can you make a table?  
(48) S9: No, I can't.  
(49) T (pointing to another student): Can you make a table?  
(50) S10: Um, no.  
(51) T (pointing to another student): Can you make a table?  
(52) S10: Of course not.  
(53) T: If you try, you can make a table. Ha, you only need some tools. For example, you need this (pointing to the picture of a hammer on the board). You need hammer, you need nail, you need many things. Ok?

Class B:

- (1)T: Before starting the new lesson, I'd like to ask you some questions about the previous lesson, lesson 2, ok.  
(69)T: You are now in classroom. Can you see me? Can you see the boards?  
(70) Ss: Yes.  
(71) T: [Can you see your friends?  
(72) Ss: Yes  
(73) T: [Why? Because there is light. Because sun is in the sky. Ok?

In Class A, the students seemed very confused about the teacher's question as to whether they were able to build a table. When one of them were asked later about the reason why they were confused about this question, she said that the question seemed nonsensical since it was not usual for the girls at their age to have such experiences, neither as a school task nor as a form of entertainment. However, no one in the class wanted or found the opportunity to mention this to the teacher. The same observation could be made in the second excerpt taken from Class B.

#### **Interruption**

With respect to interruption, the teacher (see Excerpt 5 below) was found to repeatedly interrupt the students who were trying to respond to his questions. His impatience with students who were merely attempting to answer his questions clearly appeared to make students feel frustrated. The students, however, rarely interrupted their teachers. Interruption could be considered impolite or even violent behavior in conversational interaction if it is done by the less powerful discourse participants. But it seemed natural when done by the more powerful participant like a teacher in a classroom setting 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 favor of those in power (Briggs, 1992). Excerpt 5 is an example of the teacher interrupting the students:

Excerpt 5

Class B:

- (15) T: Who sent a spaceship around the moon?  
(16) S5: Russia  
(17) T: [Raise your hand first. (Pointing to another student) You!  
(18) S4: Russian spaceship.  
(19) T: [Russian sent spaceship around the moon, ok.  
(38) T: Ok you please (pointing to another student) Do you sometimes travel?  
(39) S8: travel  
(40) T: [Do you sometimes go to another city?  
(41) S8: sometimes.  
(42) T: [Yes, sometimes. How do you travel? By what?

**Topic control**

Walsh (2002) maintains that “as in any institutional discourse setting, participants in the EFL classroom are to a large extent restricted in their choice of language..., teachers largely control the topic of discussion” (p. 4). In the present data, it was obvious that the topics for the classroom exchanges were always changed by the teacher in every exchange of the interactions, often by raising new questions. At some points, the teacher disregarded 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. Excerpt 6 shows how the teacher changed the topics of the exchanges.

Excerpt 6

Class A:

- (57)T: Do you like toys?  
(58)Ss: Yes.  
(59)T: Toy?  
(60)Ss: Buzzing  
(61)T: Toy?  
(62)Ss: (in Persian) “asbab bazi”.  
(63)T: (while writing the word on the board) Merry- go- round.  
(64)Ss: Merry go round  
(168)T: Now, I want to test you.

### Elicitation strategies

Elicitation strategies are the questioning strategies used as the fundamental tools of teacher-learner classroom interaction. Long and Sato (1983) suggest “display” and “referential” types of questioning as two elicitation techniques used by EFL teachers. Display questions which are usually asked for comprehension check or confirmation, “are those questions for which the teacher knows the answers beforehand and requires students to display knowledge” (Luu & Nguyen, 2010, p. 33). “Referential” questions, on the other hand, “are the questions whose answers are not already known by the teacher” (*ibid.*) and therefore elicit longer, subjective and more meaningful answers. Referential questions are believed to be genuine and more interactive for the communication purposes in EFL classrooms (see Seedhouse, 1996). A prominent feature of both classroom discourses was the rarity of referential (open-ended) questions. Instead, the excessive use of display (closed) questions or limited-answer questions brought about a lack of any meaningful student participation in the classroom activities. Further, 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 shows the teachers’ excessive use of display questions.

#### Excerpt 7

Class A:

- (3) T: Yellow group! Answer my question. What’s the meaning of “chaleh/godal”?  
(4) Ss: hole

(37)T: Ok. Do children like toys?

(38)Ss: Yes.

(39)T: What is it?

(40)Ss: Gun

(41)T: It’s a toy gun.

(42)Ss: Toy gun.

(43)T: What is this?

(44)Ss: Toy car

Class B:

- (33) T: Ok, well. You, please answer my question. Do you sometimes go to park?  
(34) Ss: Yes

(94) T: Do children enjoy riding on a merry-go-round?

(95) Ss: Yes.

(96) T: Do you enjoy?

(97) Ss: Yes.

- (135) T: Yes, and this boat has (pointing to the sails)....
- (136) Ss: Sails
- (142) T: Look at the other picture. It's a ....
- (143) Ss: Highway

### Social practice analysis

While the rationale for teachers as power-holders in classrooms cannot always be regarded negatively, the way the teachers of our classrooms dominated classroom life seemed to make the students lifeless and even petrified objects. Even though the students responded to the teachers' elicitation activities, their involvement was generally limited and somewhat mechanical in that they could hardly promote their own intellectual potential and creativity during the process of their language learning, let alone take responsibility for it. This is because the present teachers appeared to have their intended discursive practices all worked out as they entered the classrooms. They controlled the start, the orientation to the lesson, and the whole process until the end as they tried to follow their pre-designed lesson plans. They had to make the students ready for the high-stake objective tests which were administered centrally by the schooling system. The students, on the other hand, were passive and powerless as they could speak only when they were called upon (cf. Bourdieu's [1987] notion of "symbolic violence" below).

As highlighted in the data analysis and commentary, the classroom discourse under study was typical of a traditional teacher-fronted classroom. Behind such discursive practices were institutional and social factors which probably influenced the extant conditions and shaped them (Fairclough, 2001). Similar to what was probably going on at the time in many other educational systems around the world, teachers in Iranian educational environments were entrusted with the "right" to take charge in the classroom while students, as they received an education, were expected to obey them within the regulative/instructional binary of pedagogic discourse "as the rule which embeds a discourse of competence (skills of various kinds) into a discourse of social order in such a way that the latter always dominates the former" (Bernstein, 1990, p. 183). As Fairclough (1992) notes, underlying such discourse in classrooms are socio-political ideologies of power hierarchy in education. Fairclough (2003) also opines that discourse has a mediating role between social events and social structures. This mediating role of discourse can function hegemonically in manufacturing consent for particular positions of power (Gramsci, 1971). Gramsci further states that "hegemony refers to 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 would appear that the hegemony of such teacher-centered classrooms is reproduced through an unspoken binary of power-powerlessness between the teacher and the students for the putative maintenance of acceptable classroom culture, that is, through keeping the students as passive recipients rather than (co-)producers of knowledge (see e.g. Levin, 2000; Watts, 2007). Such an arrangement reflects a somewhat tacit agreement between teachers and students for maintaining the status quo of institutional

compliance which is described by Freire (1973) as a “state of oppression which gratifies the oppressors” (p. 17). In the same light, in emphasizing the role of the social use of language in sustaining repressive power relations in education systems and other social structures, Faiz 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 themselves silent (Bourdieu, 1987).

In both the classrooms that we investigated, it was clear that the students were restricted in the use of their L1 unless the teacher initiated such use. This could also be regarded as an oppressive situation since it is evident that generally most Iranian high school students are not competent enough to express themselves solely in English. The L1 is seen by the proponents of critical pedagogy as one of students’ default facility which should not be taken away from them. The teachers in this study, however, believed that they were expected by the school authorities and the parents to force the students to speak English in the classrooms (see Auerbach, 1993 for an illuminating discussion of the issues).

Another significant feature of both classrooms studied was the very passive role of the students in the classroom discursive events. Most students seemed to prefer to remain silent unless they were called upon by their teachers to answer a question. According to Fairclough (2001), the less powerful participants usually use silence as a weapon to be noncommittal about what the more powerful participants say, but those in power usually force the less powerful ones “out of silence and into response by asking questions such as *do you understand, do you agree? or what do you think?*” (p. 113). In our study, it was found that the male teacher ended most of his statements with such discourse boundary markers such as “yes?”, “ok?” or “ha?”. He used them with rising intonation to elicit students’ confirmation. Such discourse markers accompanied by rising intonation are, according to Zarina Othman (2010), response elicitors. This can be seen in the examples of Excerpt 8.

#### Excerpt 8

##### Class B

(71) T: [Can you see your ↗friends?

(72) Ss: Yes

(73) T: [Why? Because there is light. Because sun is in the sky. ↗Ok?

(99) T: Ok. You can see this boy (pointing to a picture on the board). He has a hammer in his hand. A real hammer, ↗ha?

(100) Ss: Yes.

(101) T: This is a hammer too (showing a toy hammer). It’s a toy hammer, ↗ha?

## Concluding Remarks

In this study, we employed the CDA framework to investigate the nature and representation of the existing social structure in teacher-student power relations in two Iranian EFL classrooms. The results were found to be in line with what is usually expected in teacher-fronted classrooms. Teacher-student power relations in the observed EFL classrooms were unequal and in favor of both the male and the female teachers who dominated the classroom discourse. The teachers' domination in both classrooms was mainly manifested in asymmetrical distribution of talk time, turn-taking and elicitation strategies which were appropriated discursively. The power of the teachers over their respective 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 metafunctions.

The data analysis also revealed that the discursive strategies employed by the teachers were, knowingly or unknowingly, at the service of establishing their own dominance. Never did the teachers attempt to stimulate their students to be curious or inventive. Neither did they provide their students with any opportunity to be creative and critical towards achieving productive outcomes in the learning process.

Silence on the part of the students did not seem natural in the classrooms since even when they were asked very simple and self-evident questions during the teaching process, they were hardly willing to attempt an answer. According to critical pedagogy theorists (Freire, 1981), students' silence cannot and must not be taken for granted as this silence might be attributed to their reluctance to participate in classroom activities in opposition to the forces they feel emanating from their teachers. Students' noncommittal classroom behaviors may therefore 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).

We also found very few instances in the data to deal comprehensively with the students' discursive practices. This was because of their very limited responses in the classroom interactions. It is acknowledged that the exercise of power, however, is a potentially two-way phenomenon in any socio-political context such as that of a language learning classroom. Therefore, further studies can be conducted with more classrooms, over longer periods of observations using the ethnographic approach. This would yield more comprehensive data which can be analyzed for the purpose of an in-depth description, interpretation and explanation of critical issues in the EFL classroom life.

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