Power Relation and Critical Pedagogy in Classroom Discussions: a Case Study of EFL Education in China[*]

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Abstract - Based on the analysis of discourse in an EFL classroom engaging critical pedagogy, this paper argues that even though critical pedagogy encourages the voices of students, it is still obvious to find evidences of power relation in classroom interaction. Accordingly, a case study is conducted to explore how to unveil the unbalanced power relation in such classroom setting by analyzing data in classroom observation, audio recording and interviews from the phonological level, lexical level, conversational structure level, and generic structure level. It is hoped that teachers could get some enlightenment on ways of empowering both teacher and students in future educational activities.

Index Terms - power relation, critical pedagogy, classroom discussion, EFL Education in China.

1. Introduction

Learning English as a foreign language has been a compulsory course for school education in mainland China for over thirty years, ranging from primary school to higher education. Characterized as the world's most population of EFL community, China has currently been experiencing a significant turning point in EFL education i.e. an increasingly important focus in literacy practices is placed on critical engagement rather than on linguistic features. This trend is marked with the heated discussions on learners' deficiency of critical literacy in English education. As a result, more and more researchers and teachers are trying to introduce critical pedagogy into classroom activities.

Critical pedagogy can be dated back to Plato and Socrates for their stress on the importance of critical self-examination in human interaction and the co-construction of knowledge [1]; In recent 50 years, it benefits enormously from the contribution of Freire, together with other contemporary critical pedagogy theorists Giroux, Mclaren, Macedo and many others. According to Giroux, Critical pedagogy is "the educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action"[2]. Particularly in education, critical pedagogy stresses the active nature of students' participation, critical thought, the opportunity to speak with their own voices, in other words, the respect for equal rights and power.

"Power" is defined as "the ability or right to control people or events" in the Longman dictionary of contemporary English. This study will discuss power from Foucault's point of view. According to Foucault [3], power constitutes discourse, knowledge, society and subject. "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations [3]. That is to say, power is believed to be everywhere.

Given the fact that engaging critical pedagogy in EFL education is shifting the emphasis from teachers to students, meanwhile encouraging students to be empowered and finally liberate themselves in the process of a humanist and emancipatory praxis, it is generally agreed that critical pedagogy can improve the unbalanced power relations in traditional education[4-6]. In mainland China, the deficiency of EFL learners' critical literacy has been widely discussed[7, 8], However, only few researchers are integrating critical pedagogy in language education, not even to mention the study on power relations particularly in critical pedagogical classrooms. Accordingly, this study is not going to restate the significance of critical pedagogy, but to examine the power relation in an EFL classroom where critical pedagogy is implemented.

2. Research Questions

In order to meet the aims of this study, this project is going to answer the following questions:

a) Are there still any power relations in a critical pedagogy classroom?
b) If there are, what do power relations in this classroom perform in this classroom? If there aren't, why?
c) What will the future EFL education benefit from this project?

3. Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, a qualitative case study was conducted to observe a first-year EFL class in a university located in Wuhan, Hubei province, China.

A. *Participants and context*

29 university students (25 females and 4 males) and one

male teacher participated in this project. The students are first-year English majors at Zhongnan University of Economics and Law. The teacher is conducting a critical pedagogy in his teaching activities in order to improve students' critical literacy in EFL education.

B. Data resources

In order to ensure the methodological trustworthiness of this study, different sources of data collected including classroom observation, audio recording and interviews.

C. Data analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis[9] will be employed in this study as the theoretical framework to analyze the collected data. In particular, this study will follow the literature of social semiotics, social cognition, psychology and systemic-functional linguistics, and discuss from four perspectives: the phonological level, lexical level, conversational structure level, and generic structure level.

4. Findings and Discussions

After two months classroom observation, 30 hours classroom activities were recorded including warming-up discussions, teacher-student interactions, debates etc. And then the researchers filtered all the recordings and selected three typical class periods (90 minutes for each) for this analysis, which is called Discussion 1, Discussion 2 and Discussion 3 in the following discussions. Then, the audio recordings were transcribed under the guidance of Atkinson and Heritage's[10] transcription notation. Following that, the transcriptions were analyzed from phonological, lexical level, conversational structure and generic structure levels, together with the triangulation process by further interviews.

A. The phonological level

Critical pedagogy in EFL education in this study is characterized with Socratic dialogic approach i.e. encouraging teacher-student interactions and peer learners' interactions via questions and talks. Thus, the intonation of the questions can imply the speaker's social status and position, or the unbalanced power relations between speakers.

Previous studies show that rising tone in questions infer speaker's inferior or subordinate social status while falling tone in questions indicate speaker's superior or dominated social status. According to Halliday[11], intonation is not just an accent or a way of speaking but also a way to infer different meanings. Wh-questions with falling tone infer neutral attitude or meaning, and Wh-questions with rising tone infer tentative attitude or meaning; Yes/No questions with rising tone infer neutral meaning while with falling tone indicate impatient or dominated meaning; "Or" question with a falling tone and then rising tone infers choice making meaning while with rising tone and then falling tone indicates confirmation.

TABLE 1   Frequency statistics of Question Intonation in 3 discussions

	Total Question Moves	T to S		S to T		S to S	
		F	R	F	R	F	R
D 1	106	74	30	0	1	0	1
D 2	60	34	20	0	0	0	6
D 3	60	36	15	0	6	1	2

(D: discussion; T: teacher; S: student; F: number of falling intonation question; R: number of rising intonation question;)

As we can see from Table 1, most of the questions raised in classroom discussion are from teacher, very few are from the students. Though the teacher agrees to engage critical pedagogy in his class, he still shows a strong unequal power relation in activities. In Discussion 1, a total of 106 questions are initiated, and out of which, 104 come from the teacher, the other two are started by students. Moreover, with regard to the intonation, there are 30 questions uttered by teacher in rising intonation while 74 questions were in falling intonation. The teacher prefers to utter falling-tone questions in order to push students with eagerness and expect an answer from them, or put some rising-tone questions seeking for responses to his suggestions or encouraging answers. More evidences can also be found in discussion 2 and 3.

EXTRACT 1
T: What do you mean by "sustainable and healthy way"?Can you explain it?↑
S10: In English?↑ (2.0) (S to T question)
T: Hollywood style. OK! Thank you. Any other question? ↓
S2: What is your favourite movie, Chinese movie or foreign movie?↑(S to S question)

The first two turns (T and S10) in Extract 1(from D1) are about asking for permission to speak in Chinese with rising intonation, teacher's permission will decide the readiness to keep the conversation moving forward. In the second two turns (T and S2), when teacher ends up the question with a falling intonation, it expresses the confidence that the teacher expects questions from students, and apparently it works when S2 starts the student-to-student question. There are also examples in D2 and D3, which prove that the teacher is in superior status in the discussions with falling intonation in preference to rising one and tend to express his controlling attitude towards the students, while students prefer to use rising intonation for teacher's permission or suggestions. However, most student-to-student questions are initiated in rising intonation to show their curiosity about each other's opinions rather than seeking approval in student-to-teacher rising intonation questions.

One exception is in D3, a question initiated by student to the classmate is a falling intonation. It says, "Ok, I have a question. Do you prefer to do what you like or prefer to do what others want you to do? ↓" This falling intonation implies the purpose to argue with classmates. Obviously, in critical pedagogy, this is a good example to show the empowerment of students in classroom activities. However, it is rare in this

study. Generally, teacher's questions in falling intonation still control the majority of discussions.

EXTRACT 2

T: Ok, the last topic "Is the toilet seat really dirtier than a phone?"
S: When I read this topic, I think this result is based on a research.
T: Do you believe it?↑1
S: Yeah, I believe it and I...
T: = So why you believe it?↓2
S: Because um...
T: = Just because of some data?↓3 Or some numbers?↓4...
S: They just do some...
T: =Ok. Ok. Some professors maybe have just designed some tests and find out something very dirty, something in your kitchen or bathroom is very dirty, while the toilet seat may not be dirty, right?↓5 So what do you think of it?↓6
S: I, I, I...
T: Can you believe it?↓7
S: I believe it. I want......
T: =(interruption) Ok. Ok. I think maybe the data sound like coming from the authority, but I don't believe it.

During the short discussion in Extract 2, the teacher utters 7 questions including 6 falling intonation questions and one rising intonation question. "it" in the first question "do you believe it?↑" refers to a report about "cell phone is dirtier than toilet seat". By initiating the question the teacher wants to know more opinions from the student. When the student gives a confirmed answer and wants to say something more, the teacher interrupts by "so why you believe it?↓" with a falling intonation, encouraging the student to prove his argument. The student is not ready and fails to reply with a quick answer. Therefore, the teacher interrupts him again by two questions with falling intonation. The student fails to give an explanation to teacher's question and then he gets two more questions as soon as he begins to talk again by saying "They just do some…". Unexpectedly, the teacher interrupts once again. In this example, We can see a strong dominant position in question-and-answer moves where the teacher is controlling the whole process, leaving no chance for the student to complete his answer. This is obviously unmasking the asymmetric power relations between teacher and students. According to the interview, the students want to react quickly but sometimes they fail to perform well, and they also hope the teacher can be patient and wait for students' response. Actually, even the teacher himself is surprised with his hegemonic status. But both the teacher and students agree that the objective is to provoke the questioning spirit and a discussion climate by pushing the students to think critically and to be accustomed to challenges if only the teacher could have been more patient.

There are also many other extracts to reveal teacher's superior status and dominative position and students' subordinate position in classroom from the intonation perspective. In short, falling intonation used by teacher facilitate the power control of the whole classroom. According to the interviews the students are nervous when the teacher doubts their answers with a falling intonation. Therefore, the rising intonation can be used more by teachers to encourage them to be active in the classroom.

B. The lexical level

Lexes express the speaker's attitudes and intentions and also construct the speaker's social identity and social position. Critical analysis of classroom talks on lexical level is closely concerned with lexes appraisal including three kinds of words: evaluative lexes, modal expressions, vocatives. In this paper, modal expressions will be discussed.

TABLE 2   Value degree of modal expressions

Modality value	Modal expressions
High	must, have to, ought to, can't, couldn't, mightn't, certainty, always
Medium	will, would, should, probable/usual
Low	May, could, might, possible, sometimes

Halliday [12]

Modal expressions show politeness of the speaker as well as the speaker's attitude and intentions. Halliday[12] states that all modal expressions imply value orientations which is related to the degree of politeness. He divides modal expressions into three classes based on the value degree (Table 2): high, medium and low. According to Hodge & Kress[13], modality constructs the degree of authority of an utterance. High or medium modal expressions are often used by speakers with higher social status, while low modal or medium expressions are used by speakers with lower social status or inferior position. In this way, using modal expressions can unmask the unbalanced power relation in classroom dialogues.

Among all the examples from the three discussions in this study, "can" is the most frequently-used modal expression in conversations between teacher and students. But for conversations among peer students, it has just been used only twice as in utterance: "Can I use Chinese? I think… Can I use Chinese?" The student is talking with another student, but meanwhile looking at the teacher with the eagerness to get teacher's permission. On the other hand, the teacher uses "can" when saying "Can you explain it?", "Can you just make it simple?", "Can you tell us something about…?", and "Can you…?" with an attempt to encourage feedback from the students.

"Would, should, need" are also uttered by the teacher in the discussion, but they mostly appear in statements rather than in questions, such as "I would like you to share…", "You should try your best to make contribution…", "You need to do some research about the title… " etc. All of these statements initiated by the teacher are to suggest the further exploration activities for the students.

Modal expressions, according to Halliday[12], can infer value orientations in speech utterances. Wang[14] also presents that modal verbs can reveal the power relations in the society. The person with the higher status prefers to use high or medium value modal verbs to convey the speaker's power and inoffensive status, on the contrary, the speakers with inferior status prefer to use low or medium value modal verbs

to express the respects to others and subordinate to the other speakers.

In these examples the teacher and the students all prefer to use medium modal verbs while the teacher uses them more often than students do. Therefore, the teacher's status in the classroom discussion can be explained by the modal lexes to some degree. But when analyzing the personal interview data, this study finds that in China, the choices of modal verbs of English teacher are mainly decided by their habituation or language learning experience instead of careful consideration or natural language performance like people from English speaking countries in considering the fact that they are not native speakers. For students, they use some modal verbs only because they are in their vocabulary lists without considering the implied value of the modal lexes.

C. The conversational structure level

Based on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics [12], and the speech function framework of Eggins and Slade [15], the critical analysis of classroom talks on conversational structure level will be mainly focused on the dialogues of teacher and students from the perspective of turn, move and speech function. In this part, examples from D3 is presented. Analysis is based on the calculation of numbers with regard to turns, moves and questions, and followed by the further discussion from interview results.

In table 3, there is no significant difference between the amount of turns and moves for teacher and students. It means that the discussion in this critical pedagogy class is effective, and the students' problem-posing motive has been stimulated. However, the number of questions and the speech function of opening moves, continuing moves and responding moves can explain the question of power relations.

In D3, teacher initiates 17 opening moves while students start only two, but students present 12 in responding moves, which is more than that of the two responses from the teacher. Accordingly, it implies the teacher's dominance position in the classroom discussion in way that teacher controls the question initiation stage and stays in a superior status while students are in answer offering position thus play subordinate roles.

Similarly, if we compare the data in Table 1, D2 shares the same situation as D3, and in D1, the teacher's dominant role is much higher than that in other two discussions.

TABLE 3 Frequency statistics of conversational structure level in discussion 3

	T-initiating	S-initiating
Turns	15	14
Moves	25	20
Questions	51	9
Opening moves		
Question	12	2
Statement	3	0
Command	2	0
Total	17	2
Continuing moves		
Elaboration	2	3
Extension	1	1
Enhancement	1	2
Total	4	6
Responding moves		
Answer	0	10
Affirmation	2	0
Statement	0	2
Correction	2	0
Total	4	12

D. The generic structure level

A genre is a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture[16]. Questions and responses in the classroom dialogue can be analyzed on the basis of generic analysis theories. According to Martin [17] and Wang[14], questions and answers form different stages in the generic structure in dialogue. One important principle is that the speaker who controls the obligatory stage is in dominant position, while the speaker who controls the optional part is in subordinate position. Therefore, this paper adopts this principle to figure out the power relationships between teacher and students in classroom dialogues.

The pattern of discussion in this critical pedagogy class includes three parts: 1) Information-sharing. At the beginning of the discussion, teacher would introduce the class plan, then raise some questions about a topic or would encourage students to share their reading reflection. After that, teacher would encourage students to raise question about other students' reading materials; 2) Whole class discussion. This stage involves questions and responds from both teacher and students; and 3) Teacher's summary. This is the final stage, it is characterized by teacher's utterance, including his own opinions about the topics and understandings of the world and life.

If we turn to analyze each of the three stages and find which stage is obligatory, and which is optional, the power relationships will be identified.

Firstly, the stage of information-sharing is the beginning part of the whole-class activities and essential to the following classroom interactions, or in other words, it is required by the teacher, therefore, it's obligatory. If we reconsider the findings about turn-taking, move and question analysis in the conversational structure level, it has been discussed that teacher initiates the majority of questions, controls the turn-taking pattern and the direction of the discussion. This finding can also suit the information-sharing stage where teacher raises

most of the questions and manipulate this process though sometimes teacher would empower the students to raise questions. The student-to-student turns in the information-sharing stage of the three discussion are rare. That is to say, teacher dominates this stage though he tries to share power with students.

For the second stage of the whole-class discussion, it is the body part of the whole classroom activity. The teacher utters many questions and students also initiate some questions to teacher and classmates. The amount of teacher's move is far more than of the students, indicating the manipulate role of teacher in the classroom. Some student-to-student turns do appear, nevertheless most of them are triggered by teacher's questions instead of students' themselves. Therefore, the superior status of teacher is obvious in this stage, similarly, it can be described as also the obligatory stage with regard to the generic structure theory.

Thirdly, the topic closing part represents the end of one topic. It is obligatory in the class discussion for "That's all for this topic" is often used by teacher to end the discussion. Among all the transcription data, there is just one example showing that student closes the topic instead of the teacher. In that discussion, when teacher asks "Are there any questions about this topic?". Normally, the teacher wants to stop the discussion, but at that time, a student adds that "I want to know more about the 4th topic." Therefore, in the stage of teacher's summary, teacher still stands in the superior position.

Consequently, all the three stages of classroom discussion are to be interpreted mainly as obligatory generic approach rather than optional generic approach.

5. Conclusion

In response to the research questions of this study, what we have discussed in the findings can prove that even though the notion of involving critical pedagogy in EFL classroom is to encourage the voice of traditionally-marginalized participants in classroom discourse, and the contribution of this approach to the empowerment of students is obvious, it cannot be the excuse to ignore the fact that there are still unbalanced power relations in a critical pedagogy classroom. This phenomenon can be evidenced by different stages in classroom activities, and can be explained through different levels of discourse as we can see in this study, namely phonological and lexical perspectives, as well as the perspectives from conversational structure and generic structure analysis.

Further, the implication for future study and practice is that the shift from focusing on linguistic features to social, cultural and historical impact on language learning is essential and urgent in English education in China in finding the keys to helping solve students' deficiency of critical literacy in EFL education. In order to construct a democratic, liberating classroom discourse, teachers need to consider seriously some micro-level elements to decrease the asymmetric power relations, such as the tones, intonations, word choice, ways of communication with students and so on.

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