

Constructing a Democratic English Language Classroom

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Abstract

Teaching English to immigrant students is a trending issue in the US as well as in other English-speaking countries. This paper examines how the language of an ESL teacher functions in classroom interactions. The data came from an ESL class for immigrant students in the United State. The analytical framework of the paper is based on Rymes's (2009) notion of classroom discourse analysis. Based on detailed analysis of teacher-student interactions, this paper suggests that a democratic and beneficial learning environment can be created through teacher's talk in the following ways: using open-ended questions, providing multiple choices for multicultural students, as well as selecting inclusive pronouns such as "we." These pedagogical practices secure an open and democratic intellectual environment where each student's perspective is welcomed, valued and respected.

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Introduction

In culturally diversified American classrooms, the construction of a beneficial learning condition for every student is a daunting task. At the macro level, school and society exercise influence on both the teacher and students' learning; at the micro level, the teacher's as well as students' language also tend to considerably affect educational results in multicultural classrooms.

The purpose of this final paper is two-fold: first, to explore how teachers can create a beneficial learning condition through their language; second, to propose tentative suggestions for improving pedagogical practices in classrooms where the teacher and students share different sociocultural backgrounds. The research question of this paper is to examine how the language of the teacher functions in classroom interactions. According to the view of social constructionism, language does not simply portray individuals and the world; rather, it serves as a significant place for the construction of identities (Burr, 2003). As a result, teachers' language, such as the types of questions they ask, can construct their own identities as well as the roles of students. Moreover, based on the perspectives of critical discourse analysis, one's selection of words provides linguists with an indispensable resource to investigate how language functions in social processes (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001). Likewise, the teacher's word choice can influence students since school serves as a major site for students' socialization. To be more specific, this paper will focus on three categories of the teacher's language: teacher's questions, and choice of words and use of pronouns.

Literature review: teacher's language

The teacher's language plays an influential role in classroom interactions in multilingual and multicultural learning environment. A number of scholars have explored the issue of teachers' talk. In *Choice words* (2004), Johnston maintains that a teacher's selection of utterances affects the relationship between teacher and students. For instance, by asking a question for which the instructor has already formed a correct answer and then commenting on the student's response, the teacher constructs himself or herself as the judge. Additionally, not only what the teacher says but also he or she does not say carries significant consequences on students' learning and development of literacy (Johnston, 2004). In *Transformation of knowledge through classroom interaction*, scholars identify various talk moves that teachers can adopt to generate productive dialogues. For instance, teachers may request students to explain their reasons by including "why" and "how" in the question (Schwarz, Dreyfus, & Hershkowitz, 2009). Cazden (2001) also focuses on the language of instruction by examining teachers' questions. She argues that in nontraditional classrooms, teachers should raise questions that encourage students to illustrate their own thinking as well as to reflect on previous students' perspectives. Miletta (2006) analyzes how a teacher's talk and body gestures help to build a morally agreeable learning environment. In particular, the teacher and her students have cooperatively constructed a beneficial classroom community through both verbal and nonverbal interactions (Miletta, 2006). Furthermore, instead of framing one correct answer, the teacher emphasizes the clarification of ideas by providing multiple explanations for an elementary school boy who fails to understand codes (Miletta, 2006). Moreover, teacher's language in terms of the preference for pronouns also exerts impact on

teacher-student relationship. Rymes (2009) states that the awareness of choosing pronouns helps teachers to perceive how the teacher-student rapport can be framed. As noted by Christie (2002), teachers use “I” to establish authority and “we” to foster a solid relationship with students. For example, the utterance “I want you to listen” serves as a remarkable indicator of authoritativeness whereas the sentence “we’ve got another simple story” demonstrates the close relationship between the teacher and students (Christie, 2002).

The construction of a beneficial learning condition through teacher’s language

First, the teacher may frame multiple choices for students to answer questions and invite everyone to participate in classroom activities. This strategy creates an open and democratic condition that benefits students’ learning, as demonstrated by the table below.

Table 1: Mr. Z’s wrap up speech after the whole presentation event

No	Speaker	Verbal and nonverbal
1	Mr. Z	Can anybody tell me <u>where or how</u> it was like when you started trying to make sense out of it <u>or what point</u> did you start realizing that these words can mean that "I can make them mean something?" ((looking at the whole class))
2	Mr. Z	That's a hard question...the point from where it went being like, "These are just a bunch of words, I don't know what to do with them" to like "Now I know what I want to say." ((waving hands))
3	Mr. Z	Can anybody explain when you thought "Ok, I'm going to make a love poem <u>or</u> I'm going to talk about terrorism <u>or</u> I'm going to talk about cancer." Cinto?
4	Cinto	As you read the words you actually like make up--make up your own stories in your mind ((waving hands)) and then, cut them, or you can make um (.) more sentences.
5	Mr. Z	Okay, so put them together in groups?
6	Cinto	Yeah.

In line 1 and 3, Mr. Z’s two utterances starting with “Can anybody tell me” and “Can anybody explain” frame the learning opportunity as open to everyone in the class. Mr. Z does not select a specific student to respond to his questions; instead, he uses “anyone” to reveal that each student is welcomed to participate. In addition, in line 1, the underlined phrases “where or how” and “or what point” show that students have more than one choices to answer the question. Rather than providing students with one definite choice, the teacher frames multiple possibilities for students to respond to his question. Likewise, in line 3, Mr. Z also uses “or” twice to connect three probable rather than one exact choice for students to think about how they composed their poems. What is more, the choices—“a love poem”, “talk about terrorism” and “talk about cancer”, are all related to the themes of students’ presentations, which denotes that the teacher acknowledges and values their perspectives. It is also notable that Mr. Z’s selection of students’ previous ideas also resonances Cazden’s (2001) notion that in nontraditional classrooms, teachers raise questions which promote students to contemplate what other students have said. Furthermore, Mr. Z constantly looks

around the class and gestures with his hands when interacting with students, intending to invite them to learn. In line 4, Cinto takes the floor to explain his process of writing poems, and Mr. Z acknowledges his personal perspective in line 5. In summary, Mr. Z provides students with multiple choices to be involved in critical thinking, and valued each student's viewpoint, both of which assure an open and democratic learning condition.

Second, teachers may construct a beneficial learning environment in multicultural classrooms by raising open-ended questions. As Rymes (2009) points out, genuine questions seek the answer from the students, which promotes them to think critically. The following analysis illustrates this approach.

Table 2: Dalia's presentation about a person's life choice

No	Speaker	Utterance	Move
1	Dalia	Life choice. Start something authentic, original, magical, intelligent, curious, brilliant, happy, free. Learn how to behave because enough is enough.	Explanation
2	Mr. Z	Good I like how you read that. Good. <i>Can we see it?</i>	Evaluation Initiation
3	Dalia	((showing the poster to the whole class))	
4	Mr. Z	Nice. <i>Can you tell me a little bit about the list of words you have at the end there?</i> You kind of tell us in the beginning about life and decisions and then all these words just together. <i>Why did you pick a couple of those words?</i>	Evaluation Initiation Comment Initiation
5	Dalia	I picked those words <i>because</i> (.) when people, um (.) start something new. There are something that they have to know. They have to do.	Explanation
6	Mr. Z	Good.	Evaluation
7	Dalia	With intelligent, something original.	Explanation
8	Mr. Z	Good. So these are all the things that a person might need (.) to begin something new or to make a new decision. Excellent. Good. <i>I didn't think about that one.</i> Very good.	Evaluation <i>Comment</i>
9	Dalia	For a good future.	Explanation
10	Mr. Z	A good future, nice. Nice job. Thank you. ((claps))	Evaluation

In line 1, Dalia introduces her poem about life choice. In turn 2, Mr. Z acknowledges Dalia's ideas and then encourages her to show the poster to the whole class. In line 4, the teacher raises two open-ended questions to elicit the Dalia's reasons for choosing the words on her poster. As Vaish observes (2008), genuine conversations between the teacher and students as well as open-ended questions improve learning. Mr. Z's two questions are not based on the presumed answers that he had in mind; rather, they are related to Dalia's own preferences because he uses the pronoun "you" in the utterances "can you tell me" and "why did you."

In *Choice words*, Johnston (2004) proposes a myriad of strategies to raise questions that stimulate learners to be engaged in intellectual activities. Mr. Z's second question

in turn 4, starting with “why,” testifies Johnston’s (2004) finding that “why” questions are essential for argumentative training and logical development. As demonstrated in the data, Dalia develops her chain of logic in turn 5 by expressing the reasons for her choice. Moreover, in line 8, Mr. Z’s italic sentence “I didn’t think about that one” reveals that Dalia’s answer is valued as a contribution to the class that the teacher cannot offer. It is worth mentioning that this utterance also verifies that the teacher does not hold all the answers, and students’ diverse perspectives are welcomed and acknowledged (Johnston, 2004).

Besides framing multiple choices and asking authentic questions, a third way to create a beneficial learning environment is to reframe the participant structure to include more voices. Participant structure refers to the “ways of arranging verbal interaction with students” (Philips, 1972, p. 377). The table below displays how Mr. Z and his students collaboratively reframe the participant structure to make it open to multiple students. In particular, Mr. Z’s language use plays an influential part in welcoming more students to take turns.

Table 3: Students defining “rebel” towards the end of Jorge’s presentation

No	Speaker	Utterance	Move
1	Mr. Z	What is it, Tarik?	Initiation
2	Tarik	Like (.) like a group of soldiers.	Response
3	Mr. Z	Well sometimes a group of soldiers are called “rebels” <i>but only when they are doing a specific //thing</i> ((looks at the whole class))	Evaluation <i>Cue</i>
5	Gregorio	//He got it]	Response
6	Cinto	They think they’re fighting over their rights. ((looks at Mr. Z))	Response
7	Mr. Z	Yeah fighting for their rights/ Usually going against the government.((looks at Cinto and nods, and then looks at the whole class))	Evaluation Complement
8	Cinto	Yeah. ((nodding))	Response
9	Mr. Z	If you're against the government, you're the rebels. If you're against the people in power, you're rebelling. To rebel, right? Or "rebellion" is another kind of word (.) <i>So if we call someone a "rebel" it doesn't mean they're soldiers. You don't have to be a soldier. What do they do in their life, sometimes?</i> ((looks at the whole class))	Explanation <i>Correction</i> Initiation
10	Tarik	Fight.	response

At first, the participant structure is teacher to a single student, because in turn 1 Mr. Z mentions Tarik’s name to answer the question. In turn 3, despite the fact that Tarik’s response is inappropriate, Mr. Z does not shut down the conversation by offering his own definition or immediately stating that Tarik’s answer is wrong. Instead, his utterance “but only when they are doing a specific thing” serves as a cue according to Verplaetse’s finding (2000) of a feedback act, because students may further explain their interpretations of rebels’ behaviors. Moreover, by looking at the whole class and

not specifying Tarik to continue as the next speaker, Mr. Z opens the structure to every student. In turns 5 and 6, both Gregorio and Cinto take turns, possibly because they notice Mr. Z's invitation for everyone to participate. It is also important to note that although Mr. Z does not necessarily ask a question in line 3, his utterance combined with body gestures serve as the similar function of a question because two students take turns to present their answers. Consequently, the participant structure changes from teacher addressing one student, to teacher addressing multiple students. In turn 7, Mr. Z does not say that Cinto cannot take the floor because it is still Tarik's turn; instead, by first nodding at Cinto and then looking at the whole class, he encourages each learner to be involved in discussion. It is also remarkable that in turn 9, Mr. Z corrects Tarik's previous turn 2 by maintaining that rebels are not always soldiers. He corrects later rather than hastily closing Tarik's utterance; therefore, Tarik and other students can take more turns to discuss "rebel."

At the same time, not all the students in Mr. Z's class may feel comfortable when the participant structure has been changed. Philips (1972) recognizes that Indian students in the Warm Spring school demonstrate a propensity for participating in the format where teacher interact with students, whereas they are not willing to participate when required to do individual projects and group works. Similarly, in Mr. Z's class as well as other multicultural classrooms, students have previously been socialized in different educational systems where they might have been accustomed to a particular format of interaction. As a result, when altering the participant structure to include more voices, teachers should at the same time pay attention to those who do not take turns because one possible factor could be that they are not familiar with the newly altered participant structure.

In summary, the map of the above discussion is T-S1-T-S2-S3-T-S3-T-S1. This interaction also reflects Nystrand's finding (1997) that classroom discourse tends to be unpredictable and non-repeatable if collaboratively negotiated. Mr. Z and the students jointly determined the meaning of rebel in a conversational interaction. Moreover, this discussion emerges towards the end of Jorge's presentation, which confirms Rymes' observation (2009) that the border of an event can serve as a productive territory for more interactions.

Fourth, the appropriate use of both inclusive pronoun and exclusive pronoun can also create a beneficial learning condition, as verified by the following analysis.

Table 4: Jorge's presentation about himself

No	Speaker	Utterance	Reference	Addressee
1	Jorge	It says "Great thinking. Friendly. Smile. Change styles of color and making full noise (.) Expect the biggest spectacle. A unique idea. Giving the perfect opportunity of hope" I talk about myself (.) I am friendly (2). I like to make full noise.	first single	Jorge
2	Mr. Z	Good.		
3	Jorge	I. (.) ((laughs)) (4)	first single	Jorge

4	Mr. Z	That's all?	third single	Jorge's presentation
5	Jorge	((laughs))		
6	Mr. Z	Let's see it again. Let's see what you did (.) Hold it up.	second plural	Mr. Z and all the students
7	Alim	Let me see.	first single	Alim
8	Jorge	((shows his poster to the whole class))		
9	Mr. Z	Good.		
10	Gregorio	Hope? Hope.		
11	Mr. Z	So it's (.) a lot of music. It's about, um, hope. So these are all words you feel have you . (.) Now you have //"energy"] and "rebel" on there. Why did you pick those words?	second single	Jorge
12	Gregorio	//energy]		
13	Jorge	(4). I have a lot of energy.	first single	Jorge

In line 1, Jorge expresses what he thinks about himself. In line 2, Mr. Z acknowledges his presentation. Jorge utters “I” in line 3, but does not continue to produce extended responses. Mr. Z first says, “that’s all” with a rising tone so as to elicit his explanation, but it seems that Jorge still cannot further illustrate his ideas. In line 6, Mr. Z uses inclusive pronoun “us” twice to encourage Jorge to show his poster to the whole class. By saying, “let’s see” instead of “let me see”, Mr. Z frames the learning environment to include every student in the classroom. According to Johnston (2004), the “let’s” framework indicates collaborative efforts in problem-solving tasks. In lines 7 and 10, both Alim and Gregorio participate in learning. It is likely that Mr.Z’s invitation of all the students to participate has led to Alim and Jorge’s involvements. My assumption is that other students, although they remain silent, are still probably being engaged in learning by observing Jorge’s poster because Jorge shows his poem to the whole class for a few seconds. In line 11, Mr. Z changes the use of pronoun from an inclusive one to an exclusive one to achieve another pedagogical purpose. Mr. Z selects “you” four times to particularly choose Jorge to describe more about his poem. This change of pronoun tends to indicate that it is time for Jorge to come up with his own explanation. In line 13, Jorge maintains that the reason for his choice for words such as “hope”, “energy”, and “rebel” can be attributed to the fact that he has a lot of energies. It is also remarkable that in line 13, Gregorio utters “energy” simultaneously with Mr. z, which indicates his involvement.

In short, by using inclusive pronoun “us”, Mr. Z encourages all the students to participate in Jorge’s presentation; by choosing exclusive pronoun “you”, Mr. Z elicits one student’s personal perspective of an issue. As a consequence, the teacher’s choice of both inclusive and exclusive pronouns depends on the context, and his usage of these two types of pronouns promotes a beneficial learning condition for each student.

Conclusion

It is fairly evident that a beneficial learning environment can be created through teacher's talk in the following ways: the use of open-ended questions; the multiple and possible choices for multicultural students, as well as the appropriate selection of pronouns. In Mr. Z's class, these pedagogical practices secure an open and democratic intellectual environment where each student's perspective is welcomed, valued and respected. Similarly, other teachers may also adopt the above strategies through language, the powerful instructional tool, to create a beneficial learning environment.

At the same time, teachers should also be aware of the fact that in multicultural classrooms, students' previous educational and social backgrounds may affect their classroom comportments in the US. For some students who are accustomed to listening without speaking, or who are familiar with teacher-centered educational systems, the teacher's expectation of their verbal participation may not be a workable criterion to gauge the learning results of those students. In Mr. Z's class, for example, it seems that girls seldom take turns either during or after the presentation event. Nevertheless, we cannot assume that they are not learning by merely observing their oral engagement; they can learn from listening to other students' presentations and Mr. Z's comments. Moreover, the teacher's language may also silence students if it fails to include their shared experience. Accordingly, instructors should be cautious of their language use and be open-minded in evaluating students' classroom behaviors.

From my personal perspective, to incorporate students' shared experience as immigrants or second language learners of English through teachers' selection of questions can be workable to invite everyone to learn. Moreover, teachers can also use universally accepted gestures such as looking around, making eye contact, and smiling to acknowledge students' behavior. In addition, the problem of social inequity is a recurrent issue that has been mentioned in students from Mr. Z's class. My hypothesis is that students in other multicultural classes may also raise similar topics. Classroom discourse analysts can observe both Mr. Z's and others' classes to see if recurrent issues exist or not with the aim of providing suggestions on teachers' choice of words to address students' common concerns. Finally, the construction of democratic and open classroom required the joint efforts of individuals both at the micro and macro levels, which indicates that teacher's language should be combined with other agents to guarantee a beneficial learning condition in the long term.

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