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# A Discourse Analysis on the Multi-Voicedness in a Sunday School Classroom

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This study was conducted in a Sunday School Classroom where verbal participations of a group of children saying goodbye to their two friends leaving for Korea permanently. Their interactions were made under the leading of a teacher. Because of its unique circumstances, the teacher and the students did not show much intensity over getting the control of the class. The teacher naturally tended to keep her script by controlling the flow of students' farewell talk and the students seemed to follow the teacher's guidance. However, from time to time, the students covertly attempted to create their own script as counterscript to teacher's script and the teacher did not deter their attempt and rather cooperate with them, even though she came back to her script shortly. This dynamics among the participants of this class showed an interesting nature of multi-voicedness in the classroom where the power relations are shaped along with the contributions from the participants. This is not a typical context where language learning occurs, but the pattern of interactions was led to meaningful results that can be applied in English education settings.

**[classroom/multi-voicedness/power relations/knowledge construction/script]**

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the most of classrooms, what counts as learning and who has access to this learning is determined by the values of the local culture and larger society and by the particular beliefs and practices evident in the social spaces of the classroom. Everyday activity of classrooms, such as the face-to-face interaction of the classroom participants, shows how who gets to learn and what is learned is connected to the social relationship constructed in the classroom and how power lies in these constructed social relationships. It can be said that the classroom mirrors the large societal structures and power relationships (Arrnowitz &

Giroux, 1993; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1988).

The traditional metaphors for power in classrooms have named the teacher as autocratic ruler, drill sergeant, factory manager, leader in battle, while framing the students as subjects, recruits, laborers, soldiers. These metaphors look plausible in the classroom because it seems that the learning is initiated and facilitated by teachers most of the time. However, a different conception is derived. According to Foucault (1980), "Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization and not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power" (p. 98). This idea suggests the mutuality of the power relations of teacher and students, the extent to which they may at times agree, disagree, or be out of touch as to their goals, and the constant process of change and effort that is characteristic of classroom life. In a simpler way, it would be better to say that both teachers and students establish norms and expectations for realization of their roles and relationships as teachers and learners in the classroom.

This study, conducted in a classroom setting of a Sunday school, examines how the relationship between a teacher and a group of kids is locally shaped through the various configurations of talk and interaction in the classroom, and thus present a situated and dynamic notion of power. Furthermore, features of participation of the teacher and students are analyzed in terms of their power relations. It is not a typical setting for language learning, but the patterns of interactions among students were pretty interesting enough to look at. Especially this study pays attention to students' differentiation from teacher-dominated classroom discourse. The notion "underlife" that is referring to the range of activities people develop to distance themselves from the surrounding institutions (Goffman, 1961) is used in analyzing students' verbal behaviors that attempt to undercut the roles expected of participants in a situation (Brooke, 1987). It would be quite interesting to look at atypical classroom setting where teaching and learning are not the foci from a perspective of power relations.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Bakhtin's (1981) theories of dialogic meaning and social heteroglossia explain the nature of the classroom that is multi-voiced. In his analysis of a novel, Bakhtin reveals how an author speaks through the multiple voices of his characters. The author uses his voice to create the internal dialogic meaning of novel. Dialogue is not simply between people and languages, but within people and between the frames that people use to categorize experience. That is the concept of dialogization that is used to describe something more than simply dialogue. Bakhtin expanded his analysis to the role of the author in the

"heteroglossia of his epoch" (p. 285). Thus, the idea of social heteroglossia, or the inherently intertextual and interdiscursive nature or social interaction, is not only a feature of novelistic writing, but a feature of the world (Fairclough, 1992). In a classroom setting, both teacher's and students' internal dialogization become relevant when they occur together as part of heteroglossia.

In the classrooms, there are various social spaces that exemplify situations where power was distributed unevenly. Power is not unidirectional but dynamic. It emerges in complex and multiple ways. Power relations are perceived and become part of one's identity as one participates in the practices of particular communities (Foucault, 1977; Lave & Wenger, 1991). According to Gutierrez, Rymes & Larson (1995), classrooms are mutually informing but seemingly exclusive places where teacher and students reside and interact. They defined these as official and unofficial places within which the teacher "script" and student "counterscript" are constituted. The term "third space" is used to describe how these spaces intersect and create the potential for more authentic interaction and heteroglossia. That is, teacher's monologic script stifles dialogue and interaction, which reflects dominant cultural values while those who do not comply with the teacher's rules for participation form their own counterscript. In this context, members of classroom community are equipped with various expertise in the form of local knowledge, but rigidly built-in knowledge of the teacher and classroom tend to displace the local and culturally varied knowledge of the students. Naturally, the students create third space to develop their counterscript. The emergence of the conterscript reveals the multi-voiced and dialogic nature of any classroom.

In the face of a teacher script, students assert forms of local knowledge that are neither recognized nor included within the teacher script. Such forms of knowledge may be unacknowledged cultural references. These students' counterscripts develop in the space where underlife activities are under way. Goffman (1961) suggests two forms of activities: a disruptive form"where the realistic intentions of the participants are to abandon the organization or radically alter its structure" and a contained form in which the participants attempt to fit into "existing institutional structures without introducing pressure for radical change" (p. 199).

In most of classrooms, contained forms of underlife activities in which students work around the institution to assert their difference from the assigned role (Brooke, 1987). However, despite the inherent multi-voicedness of any classroom, student underlife generally maintains traditional classroom power relations. In this way, both students and teacher cooperate in maintaining distinct defensive spaces rather than challenging and ultimately transforming the dominant script (Gutierrez, Rymes & Larson, 1995). When a true dialogue between students and teacher occurs, rather than random associations between scripts, a less rigidly scripted space—the third space—is created. Within this

space, there is more of the teacher and student world views occur. “What counts as knowledge” (Freebody, Luke & Gilbert, 1991. p. 454) is negotiated between student and teacher. By departing from their own scripts, teacher and students let go, slightly, of their defensive hold on their exclusive cultures, and the interaction between their scripts creates a third space for unscripted improvisation, where the traditionally binary nature of the student and teacher script disrupted.

## III. STUDY

### 1. Background and Participants

This set of data analyzed here is a transcript of an audio file recorded at a Sunday school class in a college town in the United States. Children of the class were bidding farewell to two of their friends leaving for Korea soon. This particular discourse community consists of 10 children aged between 9 and 13. They all live in the college town, and most of their parents have settled here to seek higher academic career at a state university or near colleges. Some of the children were born in the States and some others came when they were very young. All of them are bilinguals of Korean and English. Not everyone has native-like proficiency, but their choice is English when they get together, such as in Sunday school. It is definitely because the children feel the pressure that they need to speak English not to be left out from the community. The family of these two children leaving for Korea exemplifies a common case in this community where the children are American citizens while their parents are Korean citizens. The two siblings have never set foot on the country, this process of relocation causes much excitement and anxiety, and many reminiscences from the children who have visited or have come from Korea.

**TABLE 1**

**Participants**

| Name | Age | Gender | English Proficiency Level |
|---|---|---|---|
| Brian | 11 | Male | Intermediate |
| Christina | 13 | Female | Native-like |
| Dan | 10 | Male | Beginner |
| Esther | 12 | Female | Native-like |
| Hope | 10 | Female | Intermediate |
| Kristin | 10 | Female | Native-like |
| Sarah | 13 | Female | Native-like |
| Timothy | 9 | Male | Native-like |
| Wenday | 13 | Female | Advanced |
| Yuri | 9 | Female | Advanced |

The teacher in this Sunday school session is a female Korean-American, a graduate student of the state university in town. Even though she moved to the U.S. when she was very young, her Korean proficiency level is relatively high. However, her knowledge on Korea is not up-to-dated and sometimes, and generally she is not quite able to answer the questions about Korea from the students.

### 2. Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected in a Sunday school class of a Korean church in a small American city considered a college town. The method used for the data collection is simple audio recording. Thanks to the small size of the classroom space, the utterances of the children and the teacher were clearly recorded. The recorded data was fully transcribed and analyzed.

The data was analyzed in terms of how the teacher's power in the classroom is maintained or challenged in the course of controlling the class. Generally, teacher's discourse tends to be monologic and such nature often deters dialogic interaction among students and becomes the primary script in the classroom. It was expected that, in the data, some students may contribute to and participate in the teacher script, those who do not comply with the teacher's control for participation may form their counterscript. The analysis was also carried out to find out if there existed the third space where the students and the teacher can bridge the various social spaces within classrooms.

## IV. FINDINGS AND FURTHER DISCUSSION

### 1. Moderator and Controller: The Teacher Script

Being dedicated to her job as a controller the teacher tried her best to keep the students in the flow of group talk. Even though this was not carried out in the classroom and was not teaching and learning event, a conventional teacher's role seems to be fulfilled in this context.

<Excerpt 1> T=teacher, S=Sarah, D=Dan, W=Wendy, E=Everyone
T: So uh, since today is the last day for Timothy and Esther to be here.
**I thought maybe you could say something nice...**
S: If you say anything about going to the bathroom...
T: Okay, let's start...um... Who wants, who wants to go first?
W: Me...

D: Everybody's gonna start crying after~
E: ((mixture of mimicking-crying and unintelligible comments))
T: Okay. As soon as somebody starts, everyone has to listen. Shh.
W: Never mind 'cause I put in my pocket...
T: Okay, we'll go around.

The teacher's practice is due to the ways in which she had been socialized to understand the role of student and teacher through her own experience as a student and a teacher. Even though the class was about to begin, the students did not seem to be ready. However, the teacher was not distracted and rather kept her own script. It is clear that her rule for having decent verbal interaction in the classroom is controlling the students as followers of her script.

<Excerpt 2> T=Teacher, S=Sarah, W=Wendy, B=Brian
S: Can I have something to say?
W: And...h... God!
S: I'll say, ooh... oh
T: It's okay, just say it.
S: It's not going to be embarrassing 'cause if I have to...
W: [No, I'm gonna cry.
T: Brian, you wanna say something?
B: I don't know.
T: Say something.

This excerpt shows how rigid the teacher was in keeping her script to make this bidding farewell session go as planned. When Sarah showed her interest in saying something, she was interrupted twice by Wendy who was often perceived as her rival during the whole session. Sarah tried to contribute with teacher's encouragement but she seemed to fail to meet what the teacher wished. The teacher did not persist but pursued the participation from another student, Brian. Considering her intention to get the students as many as possible involved in this interaction, it can be said that the nature of this class seemed to be learner-centered one. However, the teacher was not patient enough to wait for Sarah's comment. She wanted to distribute the turn evenly among students. Sarah may had been able to continue her utterance even after Wendy's sabotage, but the teacher regarded her hesitation as a sign of ineptness of taking her turn. What the teacher did must have been an act of saving the class from being messed with ill-structured beginning. Her script was the norm for the whole class has to follow.

## 2. The Student Script as Counterscript

In the face of teacher's script, as depicted in the excerpts above, most of time students' utterances were within the teacher script. As it becomes obvious that there is not a valued role for students in this teacher script, a competing script emerges where a student voice, or new "key," is established. "Key signals" are clues at the micro-level of language use, which indicate the mode of current talk (Goffman, 1974).

<Excerpt 3> T=Teacher, B=Brian, C=Christina, E=Esther, Kristin
T: Brian, you wanna say something to Timothy?
B: Um, we'll miss you a lot and I hope you become popular in Korea.
And, um... um...
T: Don't you have anything to say to Esther?
'Cause you've been such a good friend with her, right?
C: Um, I'm sorry, if I've been a Esther-worshipper all this time.
T: What?
E: No, that's what they've been saying...like the other kids like...
C: And... I hope you, you know what, um, Sue said, no, Sujin said?
Over there? I hope that doesn't happen to you.
E: Me too.
T: What? What was that?
S: They said that like they the gangsters in Korea like beat up little
and then they make you bow...
E: [They put cigarettes on your face everyting...
S: [And then they make you bow...
E: [And then they pull your earrings.
K: There's pickpocket, too.
T: Oh, you wanna say something, Kristin?

The first student (Brian) contribution fully comply with teacher's script. All of sudden, a bold student (Christina) got a cue from a noun phrase, "good friend" in teacher's question to Brian, and confessed that she had been called Esther-worshipper. She re-keyed the teacher's script by taking the meaning of "good friend" in an extreme way, calling herself as "worshipper." The issue of Esther-worshiper became the main topic among the students. Christina, the trigger of re-keying, acted as another trigger for creating separate counterscript in which their multiple voices are raised. Moreover, Christina even raised another issue on "gangsters" which is a group of kids bullying other kids at school. Other students suddenly and competitively displayed their

knowledge on gangster kids in Korea. Student counterscript developed independently of the teacher's script and even caused a little disruption in teacher's monologic script. The teacher even joined student script and helped the new keyed interaction go further. It means that the students used teacher contributions to build the counterscript in the underlife. Excerpt 4 would show more on this.

<Excerpt 4> T=Teacher, H=Hope, D=Don, Y=Yuri, E=Esther
T: Hope?
H: I wish you have no trouble with fire.
D: Ha ha, no trouble with?
Y: I hope you're not gonna have trouble with talking in Korean,
because I think there is a lot of American people living there.
T: Okay. Don?
D: Well, I don't think there will be a lot of people like them
because... I think she was the first, um like person
who'll play with us, and like...
H: [I want you to meet my grandmother.
T: Who was?
D: Esther. And like, remember... your... um, she she pee-peed
on our kitchen.
E: Oh yeah
T: Who?
D: Fluffy
T: Oh, Fluffy, oh~
D: That was really fun time, yeah~
E: She was too young.
Y: [Who is Fluffy?
D: A dog, a poodle dog.
T: Poodles are very smart.
E: [Yeah, smart.
Y: Esther's dog?
E: [Yeah...
D: Sooooo Cute.
T: Anything Else?

It is shown in the Excerpt 4 that not all contributions are in the same "key." One student was concerned about fire and talked about meeting with her grand mother, issues unrelated or irrelevant to the theme of the class, and these statements were almost unacknowledged.

Hope appeared to keep her own contributions while others were cooperating with teacher's script or developing into their own script as a counterscript to that of teacher. Interestingly, Yuri got a cue from Hope's utterance "trouble" in following teacher's script as she worried about Esther and Timothy's new life in Korea. Don also actively cooperated with teacher's script but his stream of thought digressed and went into the mode of underlife. Don's reminiscent remark on Fluffy's pee-pee incident triggered other students' involvement. Yuri and Esther joined and continued their underlife activity together. The teacher never attempted to overtly silence the student script. She even cooperated with them and let 'Fluffy issue' go further. However, she did not lose her track of thinking and went back to her script at the end of this excerpt.

## 3. Construction of Power and Knowledge

As the data suggests, students' scripts/counterscripts seem to create the mode of freedom or contestation. It naturally leads into the issue of power construction in the classroom. Since the classroom is the place for intellectual exchange, regardless of its depth and intensity, the possession of knowledge on the regarding agenda decides the possession of power. In the analyzed data above, the power relation between the teacher and the students looks very dynamic. The teacher still has the control of the whole class, in an aspect she got new information from her students and the students nourished their topic of conversation among their peers. This power relation produced, reproduced, and transformed in collaborative relationships, shape identity and consciousness as participants seek to become members of particular cultural and social spheres or communities of practice.

The third space in this data can be seen the social space where counter-hegemonic activity, or contestation of dominant discourses, occurred for both students and teachers. The notion of the third space can be considered a framework for redefining what counts as effective classroom practice. Effective practice, in this sense, exists in contexts in which various cultures, discourses, and knowledge are made available to all classroom participants, and thus become resources for mediating learning. It is within this third space that students and teachers can bridge the various social spaces within classrooms. This bridge creates the potential to rewrite and contest extant texts and discursive practices. It becomes possible for both teacher and students to redefine what counts as knowledge.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

In general classrooms, teacher's monologic script is so tight that students' underlife is not easily allowed to challenge its control. It is obvious that the teacher in this classroom setting is in charge of moderating students' farewell session. She wanted to evenly distribute turns to each student. Her idea of control was keeping the students remain in her script. The students seemed to be cooperative with teacher's script but they often tended to be digressed and created their own scripts as counterscripts. Both students and teacher were pretty competent within their own separate scripts but the members of this community did not have enough interactional experience in the third space to mediate participation. Both teacher and students quickly went back to where they were to avoid staying in unstable territory that was supposed to be stable as "third space." The teacher was quick to go back to her own script and the students were ready to be under teacher's control.

The students sometimes re-keyed the interaction with the teacher and sometimes went further to create their own scripts as counterscripts to that of teacher's. However, it is hard not to think that they seemed to seek either to develop spaces within the teacher-built structure in which they could act comfortably by following teacher's control, or to develop spaces in which the teacher had to act cooperatively with them. Because this was not 'learning-classroom' there was no overt or intentional attempt to upset the teacher's control of the class, but students' contributions to building their underlife interaction appear impossible for the teacher to stop. Regardless of whether the teacher sought to exercise sole control of classroom, or whether she actively intended to cooperate with their students, the students made their own contributions to the development of classroom power relations and show an unfaltering reality that classroom is the space for multi-voiced multiple scripts.

Whether they wanted or not, the teacher and students cooperated to construct a community in which both the teacher's and students' local knowledge is used to transform what counts as learning. As a pedagogical implication, in this way, the local knowledge of the community is integrated into the classroom curriculum, and the teacher and students use their local knowledge as the vehicle for the development of multiple kinds of literacy. Redefining curriculum as social practice forces the abandonment of monologic instruction and provides the social and cognitive rationale for including and constructing multiple forms of knowing. Through the joint participation in the third space, both teachers and students can take an opportunity to relinquish traditional notions of power and the need for rigid and structured power relations as prerequisites for learning. As a result, these new power arrangement would reveal the exclusiveness of existing contexts for learning for both teacher and students, triggering the beginning of the reformation.

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**Examples in: English**

**Applicable Language: English**

**Applicable Levels: All Levels**

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