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Critical Discourse Analysis of Classroom Discourse in Non-English Majors' College English Classes

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Abstract
Critical Discourse Analysis is a linguistic discipline that emerged in the middle and late periods of the 20th century. By conducting critical analysis of social texts, it explores and examines the relationship between language and social development. This paper conducts a transcription and analysis of classroom discourse in a college English class for non-English majors, aiming to explore the guiding role of this theory in college English teaching for non-English majors.

Key words: Critical discourse analysis; Classroom discourse; Power

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1. INTRODUCTION
Since the 1970s, the "linguistic turn" in philosophical research has drawn growing attention to language studies across multiple disciplines. Discourse analysis, which centers on language research, has gradually emerged as a highly valued methodology in social science research in recent years. This is because many sociologists who focus on macro social structures also pay close attention to micro social actions. Discourse is a concrete form of social action; yet, traditionally, language has often been regarded as a neutral tool, thus overlooking its social and ideological roles in constructing, reproducing, and transforming social structures.

Discourse manifests in diverse forms, including daily conversations and written texts. Nevertheless, texts have frequently been treated merely as communication media rather than core objects of social science research. Since the 1970s, researchers in the field of discourse analysis have made substantial achievements in studying second language (L2) classroom discourse, but most of these studies have concentrated solely on linguistic features. In fact, sociocultural factors exert a significant influence on classroom discourse, as they shape the description, production, and interpretation of such discourse.

Texts are inherent in discursive practices, which in turn are embedded in social practices. Regardless of how people use language, their ways of using it are socially determined, and such use generates tangible social effects. The core viewpoints of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) include the transmission of discursive power, or more specifically, the social power of institutions and social groups. According to social psychological analysis, "social power" is determined by "control" (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997).

If L2 teachers integrate critical language awareness into L2 education, help students recognize the limitations of dominant language and discursive patterns, and consciously create emancipatory discourse—also known as "empowerment"—it will facilitate the transformation of the existing order of classroom discourse. Based on this premise, this paper endeavors to explore the implicit power relations concealed in classroom discourse by examining teachers' questioning behaviors in college English teaching.

2. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS
Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an emerging branch of modern linguistic research. Integrating theoretical

achievements from linguistics, sociology, psychology, ethnography, mass communication, and other related disciplines, CDA originated in Western Europe in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Key representatives of CDA include a number of anti-mainstream linguists and sociolinguists from the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, such as Michel Foucault, Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, and Roger Fowler.

Drawing on the functionalist linguistic perspectives of the Prague School, John Rupert Firth's idea of language as a systemic network, and Bronisław Malinowski's contextual theory, M. A. K. Halliday examined the relationship between language and society from anthropological and sociological perspectives. He linked language closely to social needs, social structures, and sociocultural backgrounds, arguing that various sociocultural elements collectively constitute the meaning system of social reality, i.e., a social semiotic system.

Language is a systemic network composed of several interconnected subsystems from which people make conscious or unconscious choices. The choice of linguistic systems in communication is determined by the specific social semantic functions that communicators intend to achieve. Furthermore, language is only one component of the overall social semiotic system, capable of reflecting the special roles of other semiotic systems in sociocultural contexts. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of language's meaning and functions can only be achieved by examining it within its specific sociocultural context. In addition, theories such as register theory and metafunctional theory in systemic functional linguistics have become the theoretical foundation for critical linguistic analysis of discourse (Halliday, 2000).

Fairclough (1989) argues that "language is a form of social practice, and discourse is an instance of this social practice." The close connection between language and social practice lies in the fact that linguistic practices are socially determined. Language itself is a social behavior, and its sociality resides in the fact that the linguistic behaviors of language users are not purely individual but constrained by broader social and ideological conditions.

Moreover, variations in discourse types are closely related to social and economic factors: social differences with structural characteristics give rise to linguistic variations, which in turn actively construct and express social differences; language choices or usage are not merely passive effects of social and economic differences but strategic choices shaped by specific social contexts. Therefore, discourse and social practice form a bidirectional restrictive and constructive relationship.

The lexical choices, grammatical structures, and organizational patterns of discourse are all influenced by other factors in social life—changes in society lead to changes in discourse; conversely, discourse also reacts to other social factors, i.e., changes in discourse can promote social changes and transformations. Fairclough (1995) hopes that such discourse analysis will help people overcome their sense of powerlessness, making them realize that the existing discursive order is not fixed or immutable; change lies in systematically restructuring and reconstructing the dominant discursive order, challenging, breaking, and ultimately transforming it.

The core viewpoints of CDA include the transmission of discursive power, or more specifically, the social power of institutions and social groups. According to social psychological analysis, "social power" is determined by "control" (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Therefore, social groups with more or less power can constrain the behaviors and thoughts of other groups to varying degrees. This ability to exercise control lays the power foundation of a group in terms of social resources, including influence, property, social status, reputation, knowledge, beliefs, culture, or the expression of other forms of public discourse.

Fairclough and Wodak (1997) summarized the main research principles of CDA as follows: (a) CDA focuses on social problems; (b) Power relations are discursive in nature; (c) Language constitutes society and culture; (d) Language is ideological; (e) Language is historical; (f) There is a dialectical relationship between discourse and society; (g) Discourse analysis is interpretive and explanatory; (h) Discourse is a form of social action.

3. CURRENT SITUATION AND PROBLEMS OF DISCURSIVE POWER IN NON-ENGLISH MAJORS' COLLEGE ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

For various complex reasons, discursive power permeates all aspects of social life. Teachers implicitly internalize various instructions and requirements from higher administrative authorities, while students implicitly accept and internalize teachers' ideological consciousness and discursive norms. The broader linguistic and cultural environment is difficult to change in the short term, which places higher demands on teachers' own professional qualities and critical awareness.

Ideally, English teachers and students from various academic majors could conduct in-depth exchanges on the substantive content of topics themselves, forming a pattern of horizontal academic communication. However, the current deep-rooted dominant view is that language form takes precedence over the connotation and substantive meaning of the topic. Once horizontal communication between students is suppressed, the vertical power flow between teachers and students becomes particularly prominent and salient.

Although the discussion format in the classroom may appear lively on the surface, students only accept

language as a mere carrier of information while ignoring the rich knowledge and ideological connotations it conveys. As a result, the subjective initiative of both teachers and students has not been fully realized or exerted.

Therefore, against this specific background of language learning, the author conducted an observational study on college English classroom discourse, exploring the teacher-student power relations embedded in English classroom discourse from a CDA perspective. The study attempts to answer the following core research questions: (a) Are the power relations reflected in the studied classroom discourse determined by the dominant social ideology? (b) Do teachers occupy a dominant and controlling position in classroom discourse? (c) Do students recognize and adapt to this unequal discursive relationship? (d) How do students perceive this discursive model, and how does it effectively stimulate students' deep learning?

4. EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH

4.1 Research Objects and Methods

The classroom discourse data under study were collected from college English classes of students majoring in Materials Chemistry (Grade 2022) at a local university where the author is employed. The students were from different provinces across China but had at least six years of formal English learning experience before entering university, so they had no significant obstacles in communicating with teachers and classmates in English.

Their vocabulary size upon admission was approximately 2,500–4,000 words, which represented the average English proficiency level of students at the university. The class under study had 71 students, including 40 males and 31 females, with an average age of about 19 years old upon admission. The class had two intensive reading classes and one listening-speaking class per week, scheduled for Monday morning, Wednesday afternoon, and Friday morning respectively.

The English teacher of this class was a female with ten years of college English teaching experience. In addition, some other foreign language teachers and non-English major students from the same university also participated in this study as supplementary research subjects. The research period spanned from October 2022 to January 2023.

During the three-month research period, the author attended all English classes of the target class and recorded and transcribed more than 80% of the classroom discourse. While recording the classroom discourse, the author conducted on-site observations of the class, documenting teachers' and students' non-verbal behaviors (such as gestures, facial expressions, and body language) to supplement and enrich the audio materials.

Furthermore, questionnaires and individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students of the studied class. The content of the questionnaires and interviews mainly focused on students' perceptions and evaluations of college English teaching and their views on teachers' classroom discourse and questioning behaviors.

Interviews were also conducted with the target class's English teacher, some other foreign language teachers, and some other non-English major students from the university. All collected questionnaires and interview recordings were transcribed into written materials as raw research data for subsequent analysis.

4.2 Examples of Classroom Discourse

Research on teachers' classroom questioning behaviors has long been an important topic in both domestic and international educational research fields. The following is an analysis of the questioning behaviors in the classroom discourse of one listening-speaking class from a CDA perspective.

In the 100-minute class, the teacher initiated questions several times, but only a small number of these questions received verbal responses from students. It should be noted that the teacher was almost the sole source of classroom questions, and students rarely took the initiative to ask questions.

Analysis of the transcribed classroom discourse data revealed three distinct characteristics of the teacher's questions: (a) Most of the questions were display questions (Long & Sato, 1983), accounting for approximately 70% of the total questions. Display questions are those for which the teacher already knows the answer in advance, and they are mainly used to check whether students have mastered the taught content. For example, during the vocabulary learning stage of this class, the teacher repeatedly asked questions such as: "What's the meaning of this phrase?" The teacher's primary purpose in asking such questions was to have students demonstrate their mastery of the learned knowledge rather than to seek new answers or explore new perspectives. (b) The vast majority of unanswered questions were open-ended questions (Wu, 1993), accounting for about 90% of all unanswered questions. Open-ended questions refer to questions that require answers of at least three words and can have multiple acceptable and reasonable responses. For instance, when the teacher asked the question, "Why do you think so?" no student volunteered to respond. (c) All unanswered questions were addressed to the entire class as a whole rather than to specific individual students.

These three characteristics collectively indicate that the classroom under study was very quiet and lacked active interaction: the teacher spoke and students listened passively with little real interaction; the teacher asked questions and students answered them mechanically, as if all classroom discourse "came from a single, unified source" (Bakhtin, 1982, p. 666).

Analysis of these three characteristics shows that if students had chosen to answer these open-ended questions instead of remaining silent, it would have been difficult for the teacher to obtain a unified or expected answer. However, the teacher clearly expected students to respond to her questions, as she paused for 2–3 seconds after each question to wait for a student to volunteer an answer. This speculation was further confirmed in the subsequent interview with the teacher.

So why did students remain silent in the face of the teacher's questions? The questionnaire survey of students revealed that the main reasons for their silence were as follows (see Table 1).

Table 1
Reasons for Student Silence in Response to Teacher Questions

Reasons for Silence	Percentage (%)
Fear of making mistakes	62
Not knowing the answer at all	56
Lack of interest in the topic	70
No one else answered, so I didn't either	50
Others	13

Note. Multiple choices were allowed for the above five options.

As shown in Table 1, the main reasons for students' silence in response to teachers' questions in classroom discourse are sociocultural in nature. Students feared making mistakes in their answers, and the underlying psychological reasons for this fear were the anxiety of being blamed by teachers and ridiculed by classmates after making mistakes—almost all interviewed students mentioned these two points.

Meanwhile, lack of interest in the topics being taught was also an important reason for students' silence. During the observed classes, the teacher always asked questions based on topics specified in the textbook and teaching syllabus, prioritizing the practice of language forms over the exploration of the substantive meaning of the topics.

4.3 Research Conclusions

Observing and analyzing the classroom discourse of the studied class from a CDA perspective reveals the following key findings: (a) Teachers have always been in a dominant and controlling position in college English classrooms, manipulating students' knowledge acquisition process and the entire educational process through their discursive power. In terms of discourse structure, quantitative analysis shows that the total number of teachers' discourse moves and questions far exceeds that of students.

Regarding the number of discourse turns, although there is no absolute numerical gap between teachers and students, students' discourse turns are essentially controlled and dominated by teachers. Qualitative analysis indicates that teachers' discourse moves serve an imperative and controlling function, while students' discourse moves only serve a passive and auxiliary function.

In terms of the generic structure of classroom discourse, teachers control the obligatory core stages of the classroom, namely the stages of teacher questioning and student answering. Even the other three peripheral stages—greetings between teachers and students at the beginning of class, teacher evaluations of student performance, and class conclusion at the end of class—though not obligatory core stages, are also tightly controlled by teachers. (b) Students generally recognize and passively accept this unequal power relationship, but some of their negative responses (such as silence, inattentiveness, and perfunctory answers) can be regarded as forms of passive resistance to this unequal power relationship.

College English classrooms cannot exist independently of society, and language learning cannot take place in a social, cultural, or political vacuum (Pennycook, 1994). Firstly, classroom discourse is controlled, motivated, and determined by various social, cultural, and historical factors. Teachers should fully recognize and respect students' diverse social needs; only by meeting these sociocultural needs can effective discursive interaction processes be established and good discursive teaching effects be achieved. Meanwhile, the selection and development of classroom discourse topics must fully consider students' cognitive levels and academic interests.

In English teaching classrooms, the practice of English language forms should not be placed in the primary and sole position. The substantive topics of classroom communication should be elevated to a status equal to language learning, rather than merely serving as superficial carriers for language practice. The realization of this educational measure requires the joint initiative and efforts of both teachers and students.

For example, the specific content of discussion topics and the organizational form of classroom discussions can be independently determined by students themselves, and the traditional classroom model of "teacher-centered monologue" can be transformed into a new teaching model dominated by students' autonomy with teachers' appropriate guidance.

Returning the autonomy of topic selection to students, allowing them to choose discussion topics and organizational forms based on their own interests and learning needs, and integrating the exploration of substantive ideas with language practice in the classroom—teachers will no longer exist merely as "authoritative knowledge transmitters" but as equal conversation partners actively participating in classroom interaction.

5. CONCLUSION

Teachers' classroom discourse, including educational discourse and instructional discourse, reflects their understanding of the world, their perceptions of the nature of education and teaching, and their views on students' roles in the teaching and learning process. Through mutual dialogue and communication in the classroom, teachers and students interpret and construct their understanding of themselves and the surrounding world; in a certain sense, teachers and students achieve mutual growth and development through classroom dialogue and interaction.

Experiencing and researching education in real educational contexts, and practicing reflective teaching through communication, dialogue, and critical reflection, has been a basic orientation for improving teachers' professional development and professional lives in China in recent years.

The practical significance of this study lies in introducing the theoretical framework and analytical methods of CDA into college English teaching research, focusing on the dynamic teaching process and teachers' discursive practices, directing research perspectives towards in-depth dialogue and inquiry with real educational practice, endowing college English teaching scenarios with new theoretical interpretations, stimulating educators to continuously explore and reflect on curricula, teaching methods, textbooks, teachers, and students, and achieving a deeper understanding of the essence of education and various educational phenomena in specific educational contexts.

It encourages teachers to create more vivid, vibrant, and educationally meaningful classroom scenarios in college English teaching, making the classroom a dynamic process in which teachers and students jointly experience the projection and pursuit of life ideals and meanings, thereby improving the overall quality of education and teaching and truly realizing the fundamental goal of cultivating people through education.

By conducting a critical discourse analysis of English classroom discourse, this study examines the profound impact of various social, cultural, and ideological factors on the existing order of classroom discourse, provides practical guidance and assistance for improving teachers' practical wisdom in classroom dialogue and interaction, and ultimately aims to enhance teachers' professional qualities and critical teaching awareness.

It also explores effective ways to develop new student-centered teaching models, inspiring teachers to pay attention to and continuously improve their own discursive expression and questioning skills, promoting the smooth progress of equal teacher-student dialogue, enhancing the quality of college English classroom discourse, and improving the overall effects of English teaching.

Meanwhile, focusing on the significant influence of sociocultural factors on classroom discourse from a CDA perspective, as advocated by linguists such as Fairclough, this study aims to cultivate students' critical language awareness in school education and expand the application scope and research fields of CDA theory.

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