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| Title | Classroom interactions: when students elicit and inform |
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| Source | Asia-Pacific Education Research Association Conference 2008, Singapore, 26-28 November 2008 |

# Classroom Interactions: When Students Elicit and Inform

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**Abstract**

This paper is based on an on-going doctoral thesis which investigates the interactions that occur in the teaching and learning of Malay Language in secondary schools in Singapore. The research analyses the teaching and learning of the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and also grammar in Secondary One Express stream classrooms. The research draws on the work of Sinclair and Coulthard (Pedagogic Analysis), Halliday (Systemic Functional Grammar), and Fairclough (Critical Discourse Analysis).

The paper presents data on students' eliciting and informing during Malay Language grammar lessons. Initial analysis seems to show that unequal power relations between teacher and students that are concealed in the Initiation-Response-Feedback structure have the effect of reducing students' learning opportunities. This is especially true when students' contributions are not optimised, students' misunderstanding of concepts is not clarified and their queries are not well attended to. These would have an impact on students' learning of the Malay Language. This paper suggests that the quality crafting of teachers' responses and feedback are necessary in ensuring the effectiveness of the teaching and learning of the language.

Keywords: interactions, Malay Language, classroom discourse, critical discourse analysis

## INTRODUCTION

This paper examines what transpires in classroom discourse, particularly the students' eliciting and informing during Malay Language grammar lessons. It applies the framework of Pedagogic Analysis by Sinclair and Coulthard. The Bound and Free Exchanges that occur in classroom interactions rely heavily on the Initiation, Response and Feedback (IRF) [exchanges?]. Therefore, effective delivery of lessons is determined by the effective formulation of Initiation, and positive and timely Feedback by the teachers. The Response element given by students would be a good measure of quality initiation. For example, when a student gives a nil or wrong response, the teacher would have three choices, that is to articulate the correct answer, to move on to another student with the same question, or to reformulate the elicitation and guide the same student by using Socratic questioning.

In addition to analyzing the pedagogic structure, the language used by teachers and students was analysed using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistic framework to determine the focus of the lesson, the relationship between students and teachers and the quality crafting of Initiation and Feedback by the teachers. In addition, to enable a description of power relations in the

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classroom discourse during teacher-student interactions, Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework was used. CDA is an approach that is concerned with the social aspect of language and also the ideologies that underpin the discourses. CDA also focuses on questions that concern the role of human individuals as reflected or performed according to factors that relate, for example, to their age, social position, gender or education. CDA also permits the idea that any social or cultural construction will promote some meanings or experiences and demotes others.

## Literature Review

Discourse analysis has a long history. However, work on Malay discourse is limited, rarer still are research on classroom discourse analysis. One exception is the work of Rosniah Mustaffa and Idris Aman (2005). According to them, research on the teaching and learning process of the Malay Language (L1) in the classroom usually focused on the method, content, and teaching aids. Instead of focusing on method, content and teaching aids, their study viewed the process from the discourse analysis perspective called pedagogic discourse analysis. The discussion was based on several hours of teaching-learning case study conducted in a secondary school classroom, which emphasized integrated curriculum, in an attempt to understand the unseen social processes, such as teacher dominance in discourse. Their study revealed that teacher dominance was concealed in turn-taking system, types of questions posed by the teacher, discourse control and the overall structure of the discourse. These types of classroom discourse have their implications to the implementation of the National Education Philosophy, which lay emphasis on each student's potential. Their study revealed that the nature of learning process that took place in the classroom focused less on students' thinking skills. They suggested that students should be given the opportunities to exercise their critical and creative potentials. For the analysis, their paper adapts Fairclough's (1992; 1995) Critical Discourse Analysis framework.

Other work using CDA revolves around teacher-student's perception, scaffolding and reading materials. For instance, Sharifah Nurul Huda Syed Hussein (2005) investigates the perceptions of lecturers and students at three faculties of the University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD) towards English as Second Language (ESL) students' academic writing in non-scientific discourse. Her findings suggested that lecturers and students have different views regarding parameters of acceptability in tertiary academic writing. ESL students, in particular, were less informed of their readers' expectations of acceptable academic writing than L1 students. Her study adopts a mixed method approach to examine if students' perceptions of 'good' writing concur with their lecturers' expectations or otherwise. The conclusions suggested that there was considerable mismatch between the perceptions of these two sets of respondents and to a lesser extent, between content-course and language lecturers, and non-native speaker and native speaker lecturers.

Her study looks into the teaching of sub-skills to students. It highlighted the importance of scaffolding in the teaching of language skills. As teachers, the tendency to accept only the model answer is common. Therefore, the teachers' desire to obtain responses from the students that of

exact or very similar to what they have in their mind could be seen as curbing the students' creativity.

In a study on scaffolding, Martina Sharpe (2003) investigates the role of the teacher in facilitating students' conceptual understanding and higher thinking. To do this, firstly, the teacher's strategies for scaffolding student learning were identified. Secondly, evidence of the ways students develop their understanding from everyday language to abstract/generalized language that showed higher order thinking and conceptual development were identified. Finally, the use of various semiotic modalities, in addition to language, that support the co-construction of knowledge was investigated.

Her second research focus was to investigate how discourse mediated the process of education. This was done by looking at two aspects. Firstly, by investigating the way knowledge was co-constructed collaboratively by the teacher and students. Secondly, by investigating the ways in which students get socialized or acculturated into the practices of a particular discipline.

Sharpe mentioned scaffolding at the macro and micro level. Macro level scaffolding is scaffolding in the overall design of the unit of work to achieve specific outcomes. The micro level scaffolding or designed-in scaffolding refers to the scaffolding done during the moment by moment interactions in the lesson. In the analysis of these interactions, the scaffolding of sub-skills was identified. She used the label 'conceptual hooks' to describe the feature of the scaffolding adopted in her thesis. What 'conceptual hooks' meant was the learners' acquisition of new information through teacher planned tasks and intervention strategies. The teacher was the person who was more knowledgeable to help the students attach new information to their existing knowledge.

In a study on reading materials, On Kei Lee (2005) applies a critical discourse analysis of the Hong Kong English Extensive Reading Scheme. The extensive reading scheme involved learners reading a large quantity of reading materials, fiction and non-fiction books, according to their interests and linguistics competence. The reading materials used in the extensive reading scheme are recommended by the Education and Manpower Bureau in 2005. These reading materials were originally written for the general public and have been selected for use as learning materials under the extensive reading scheme for junior secondary school students.

In On Kei Lee's paper, two fiction books and one non-fiction book from the extensive reading program were studied. On Kei Lee looked into the political and cultural values inherent in the reading materials. He proposed the need for having pedagogy that supports the critical approach of teaching in the curriculum. His research is an example of how critical discourse analysis uses systemic functional linguistics for textual analysis.

As discussed, CDA on classroom discourse is rarely done on the teaching and learning of Malay Language. There is also very few study on interactions particularly on exchanges that are made up of Initiation-Response-Feedback format. This paper, however, looks into the moment by

moment interactions similar to the study by Sharpe to determine if learning has taken place. However, we are focusing on initiation by the students particularly on student elicit and student inform.

**Objective**

The objective of the paper is to discuss the preliminary findings which suggest the existence of unequal power relations between teacher and students that are concealed in the Initiation-Response-Feedback. This is evidence when the students' contributions are not optimised, students' misunderstanding of concepts is not clarified and their queries are not well attended to.

**Field of Research and Its Significance**

This discourse-analytic study applies the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA analyses language not only for its linguistic aspects but also its relation with the purpose or function of language. Language is seen as purposeful and that includes obtaining power. Language can be analysed to determine the power of the user in a specific community. Fairclough (1989) sees CDA as an analysis on how, through language, different social groups compete. CDA is able to satisfy researchers who are interested in understanding the relation between discourse and social and are able to provide analytical answers to social issues.

This research applies CDA into Malay Language classroom teaching and learning with a focus on teachers' pedagogy. Through the use of CDA, we hope to show the relationship between social, culture and language. We begin by describing the distinctive features of the different types of classroom discourse and pedagogical approaches of the teachers in the teaching and learning of Malay Language. Identifying these distinctive features will add to the knowledge base of pedagogy especially as a design tool for designing lesson and instructional material for the teaching of ML. This research may also surface new aspects of classroom interactions that have implications towards the teaching and learning of ML. These aspects of interaction may then be tested to look into its implications in ML teaching and learning.

**Research Data**

The discourse data in this paper comes from four sets of classroom discourse involving four different Malay Language teachers teaching grammar at the secondary one level in four different schools. The data was collected through direct audio recording while the teachers are teaching in the classroom. Recordings were transcribed into texts before critical analysis took place.

**Research Methodology**

The research methodology that this research adopts is fieldwork and library research. The research draws on the work of Sinclair and Coulthard (Pedagogic Analysis), Halliday (Systemic Functional Grammar), and Fairclough (Critical Discourse Analysis).

## DISCUSSION ON INITIAL FINDINGS

The focus of this classroom discourse analysis is on features of teacher-student interactions. Through the analysis of the IRF, initial findings showed that students' contributions were not optimised, students' misunderstanding of concepts were not clarified and their queries were not well attended to.

**Data 1:**

| TURN | SPEAKER | UTTERANCE |
|---|---|---|
| 170. | T | *Cantik. Ok. Walaupun sebutannya mungkin sebutan, ah, orang dahulu, tapi saya nak awak eja dengan ejaan yang sekarang. Mata kamu yang?* (Pretty. Ok. Although the pronunciation may be an old pronunciation, but I want you to spell it with the new spelling. Your eyes which are?) |
| 171. | Ss | *Bulat.* (Round) |
| 172. | T | Ok. |
| 173. | S | *Nama nenek saya Bulat.* (My grandmother's name is Bulat.) |
| 174. | T | *Nama nenek awak Bulat? Awak ni, macam-macam, eh. Hari ini, bulatlah, apa. Ok. Membikin pemuda menjadi?* (Your grandmother's name is Bulat? You always come up with something. Today, it is round. Ok. Making a man?) |
| 175. | Ss | *Gembira.* (Happy.) |

During a grammar lesson on adjectives, the students were told to listen to a song entitled, Azizah. The song uses many adjectives to describe the lady named Azizah. Then, the teacher questioned the students about the shape of Azizah's eyes. They responded with the correct answer, that was 'bulat' (round). A student (Turn 173) initiated with 'Nama nenek saya Bulat' (My grandmother's name is Round). This information had the potential for further discussion on the role of adjectives in the Malay culture. In the Malay culture, adjectives such as round, long, cute, short, ugly and pretty were once used to name babies. Hence, the name 'Bulat' (Round) as informed by the student. This could be further discussed with the students to give them a better and deeper understanding of the usage of adjectives in the Malay world. However, the teacher did not discuss the application of adjectives and continued to initiate with a new elicitation.

**Data 2:**

| TURN | SPEAKER | UTTERANCE |
|---|---|---|
| 367. | T | *Kecewa. Lagi apa?* (Disappointed. Anymore?) |
| 368. | S | *Takut.* (Afraid.) |
| 369. | T | *Ah? Takut.* (Ah? Afraid.) |
| 370. | S | *Kenapa takut?* (Why is he afraid?) |

| 371. | T | *Hafiz tanya, kenapa takut? Orang melihat perempuan tu yang jelita, kenapa perlu takut? Suka hati dialah, dia kata dia nak takut. Ah, ok. Jadi apa yang telah kamu sertakan adalah kata adjektif. Sekarang, Cikgu nak awak nyanyi.*<br>(Hafiz asked, why is he afraid? If a person looks at a pretty lady, why should he be afraid? It is up to him if he wishes to be afraid. Ah, ok. So, what you have just given, are all adjectives. Now, I want you to sing.) |
|------|---|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

In Data 2, during a grammar lesson on adjectives also, a student (Turn 370) initiated with an elicitation, which is 'Kenapa takut?' (Why is he afraid?). The student's eliciting was a response from another student (Turn 368) who provided 'takut' (afraid) as the answer to the teacher's question. The student (Turn 370) was puzzled on why should a person be afraid of a pretty lady. This is another opportunity for discussion in the class. Student (Turn 368) could have been given the opportunity to explain his rationale for his answer. But, that opportunity was not given to him. And the teacher continued with the lesson.

**Data 3:**

| TURN | SPEAKER | UTTERANCE |
|------|---------|-----------|
| 121. | S | *Ternyata, anak-anak dalam iklan ini amat patuh kepada ibunya.*<br>(Obviously, the children in the advertisement are very obedient towards their mother.) |
| 122. | S | *Sayang.*<br>(Love.) |
| 123. | T | *Amat apa kepada ibunya?*<br>(What did they feel about their mother?) |
| 124. | Ss | *Sayang.*<br>(Love.) |
| 125. | T | *Sayang.*<br>(Love.) |
| 126. | S | *Taat, Cikgu? Taat?*<br>(Filial, Teacher? Filial?) |
| 127. | T | *Taat. Kenapa taat?*<br>(Filial. Why filial?) |
| 128. | S | *Sebab dia nak buat juga.*<br>(Because they really wanted to do it.) |
| 129. | T | *Ok, boleh. Tapi lebih, lebih jelas apa? Perasaan sayang. Dia tak nak buat emak dia apa?*<br>(Ok, can. But more obvious will be? Feels love. They did not want to make their mother?) |
| 130. | Ss | *Sedih.*<br>(Sad.) |

In Data 3, a student (Turn 126) offered an alternative answer to the teacher's question and proceeded to check if it was acceptable. The teacher questioned his reasons for offering 'taat'

(filial) as the answer and was satisfied with the reason given. However, the teacher still insisted that 'sayang' (love) was the better answer. The exact answer required gave little room for creative thinking and better understanding of the topic.

**Data 4:**

| TURN | SPEAKER | UTTERANCE |
|------|---------|-----------|
| 193. | T | *Perasaan. Jadi baharu ini dalam kagetori apa?*<br>(Feelings. So this 'baharu' is in what category?) |
| 194. | S | *Masa.*<br>(Time.) |
| 195. | T | *Masa. Jadi? New atau just?*<br>(Time. So? New or just?) |
| 196. | S | Just. |
| 197. | T | Just. *Ok. Maksudnya baharu berlaku.*<br>(Just. Ok. Meaning, it has just happened.) |
| 198. | S | But what is new? |
| 199. | T | *Surat itu baharu saya terima daripada Amerika Syarikat.*<br>(I have just received that letter from United State of America.) |
| 200. | S | But by right it's new you know. |
| 201. | T | *Kereta saya yang baru itu selalu rosak.*<br>(My new car always breaks down.) |
| 202. | P | *Cikgu saya tulis baharu sebagai baru.*<br>(Teacher, I wrote 'baharu' as 'baru'.) |
| 203. | S | *Kalau kereta yang baharu.*<br>(If a new car?) |
| 204. | T | *Kereta yang apa?*<br>(A car that is what?) |
| 205. | S | *Kereta yang baharu itu selalu rosak.*<br>(That new car always breaks down.) |
| 206. | T | *Tapi adakah itu menunjukkan jarak, waktunya?*<br>(But, does that show space, time?) |
| 207. | S | *Cikgu, apa baharu?*<br>(Teacher, what is 'baharu'?) |
| 208. | T | **Baharu**. *Just. Baharu berlaku. Ah, Hamzah baharu sahaja keluar. Ok. Menunjukkan bilakah waktunya. Sekarang. Ok. Pada masa ini atau pada masa lampau? Pada masa dahulu.*<br>('Baharu'. Just. Just happened. Ah, Hamzah has just gone out. Ok. It shows the time. Now. Ok. At this time or last time? Last time.) |
| 209. | S | *Cikgu, habis baru?*<br>(Teacher, then 'baru'?) |
| 210. | T | *Baru? Ok. Saya dah terbalik agaknya.*<br>('Baru'? Ok. I have got it the other way round maybe.) |
| 211. | S | *Buku ini baru sahaja saya baca.*<br>(I have just read this book.) |
| 212. | T | *Sabar, eh. Saya semak kamus.*<br>*[Guru menyemak kamus.]* |

| | | (Be patient, eh. I will check the dictionary.)<br>[Teacher checks the dictionary.] |
|---|---|---|
| 213. | S | *Cikgu, baharu new. Baru just, Cikgu.*<br>(Teacher, 'baharu' is new. 'Baru' is just, Teacher.) |
| 214. | T | *Tapi tak. Kalau kita gunakan yang, kata adjektif itu=*<br>(But it is not. If we use that adjective=) |
| 215. | S | =What is the difference? |
| 216. | T | *Dia tak, dia tak tepat dalam kategori kita. Betul tak?*<br>*[Membaca daripada kamus.]*<br>*Ok. Baru maksudnya tidak ada sebelumnya. Baru, b-a-r-u, maksudnya. Ok. Jadi baru maksudnya new. Faham tak?*<br>(It is not accurate in our category. Isn't it?)<br>[Read from dictionary.]<br>(Ok. 'Baru' means not available before. 'Baru', 'b-a-r-u', means. Ok. So 'baru' means new. Do you understand?) |
| 217. | S | *Apa?*<br>(What?) |
| 218. | T | *Baru, b-a-r-u. New. Benda yang baru dibeli. Maksudnya sebelum itu tak adalah benda yang baru ni. Ok.*<br>('Baru', 'b-a-r-u'. New. Something you have just bought. Meaning, it is not available before this. Ok.) |
| 219. | S | Johor Baharu? |
| 220. | T | *Kata nama khas jangan kita gunakan.*<br>(Let us not discuss proper nouns.) |

In Data 4, the students were eliciting about the usage of 'baru' (just) and 'baharu' (new). The students were obviously confused with 'baru' and 'baharu'. A student (Turn 200) even offered his view on the teacher's explanation. He stood by his understanding when he said that 'But by right it's new you know'. He was informing the teacher that he was not agreeable with the teacher's explanation. Further exchanges showed that students' confusion about the usage of 'baru' and 'baharu' were not well attended to. Thus, the extensive exchanges on 'baru' and 'baru' occurred.

In general, most exchanges found in the data were initiated by the teacher. Such interaction structure led to teacher control of the basic organization of interaction by opening as well as closing every move and accepting students' responses. This reflected the existence of control or domination in turn-taking, whereby the student seldom had or even had no chance at all of getting a turn to speak unless given by the teacher through the given questions or requests. Although this turn-taking system is one method of controlling the flow of discourse, it also reflects teacher domination in discourse. And, in the few turns taken by the students to initiate, their eliciting and informing were not optimized.

In addition to that, the classroom discourse generally maintained the IRF format with the teacher taking longer turns than the students. Students' responses were generally short compared to the

teachers'. This situation suggested an imbalance of power during the turn-taking. And also, generally, the teachers' showed preferences for modelled-answer. This strategy of providing the 'only correct' answer could discourage students to participate in the classroom interactions knowing that their teachers always have the right answers.


**CONCLUSION**

The use of critical discourse analysis is appropriate and essential in the analysis of the classroom discourse. Through the analysis, the research has the potential to show the social practices by the institution. This paper, which presents the data on students' eliciting and informing during Malay Language grammar lessons, is based on an on-going doctoral thesis which investigates the interactions that occur in the teaching and learning of Malay Language in secondary schools in Singapore. Initial analysis suggested that unequal power relations between teacher and students that were concealed in the Initiation-Response-Feedback structure have the effect of reducing students' learning opportunities. The initial findings also did not show features of relating, linking or applying the skills and content learnt to those that were taught previously or to life beyond school and examinations. And, these would have an impact on the students' learning of the Malay Language. In order to maximize learning, it is necessary for a quality crafting of teachers' responses and feedback in ensuring the effectiveness of the teaching and learning of the language.

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