LANGUAGE, LITERACY AND POWER IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

IWAN JAZADI

English Department of STKIP Paracendekia NW Sumbawa
e-mail : iwanjazadi@gmail.com

ABSTRAK

Tulisan ini mengeksplorasi berbagai dimensi hubungan kekuasaan, bahasa, dan literasi, dan bagaimana hal ini terjadi dalam konteks pendidikan dewasa ini. Hubungan tersebut dikontekstualisasikan dalam setidak-tidaknya bentuk baku yang berbeda: interaksi mengambil giliran, interaksi satu arah, dan interaksi berbasis lembaga. Dalam dua bentuk baku yang pertama ditampakkan bahwa peran komunikasi rasional dan solidaritas telah menjadi bagian esensial dari sistem pendidikan dunia modern. Namun, dalam bentuk baku ketiga, ketika interaksi berbasis institusi, komunikasi mau tidak mau bersifat structural dan mekanistik, seolah-olah kehilangan aspek kemanusiaannya. Memahami bentuk-bentuk baku yang berbeda dalam berinteraksi memungkinkan pelaku pendidikan atau pelaku interaksi pada umumnya untuk mencapai tujuan komunikasi dengan efektif dan efisien. Namun, karakteristik bahasa, literasi dan hubungan kekuasaan diperkenalkan terlebih dahulu.

Kata kunci: hubungan kekuasaan, bahasa, literasi, interaksi mengambil giliran, interkasi satu arah, interaksi berbasis institusi

ABSTRACT

This article explores various dimensions of the relations of power, language and literacy, and how these work out within contemporary educational contexts. Such relationships are contextualized into at least three different templates: turn-taking interaction, (primarily) one-way interaction and institution-based interaction. In the first two templates it is shown that the role of rational communication and solidarity has been an essential part of educational systems of the modern world. However, in the third template, when interaction is institution-based, communication is inevitably structural and mechanistic, as if losing its human aspects. Understanding the different templates of interaction allows education stakeholders or interactants in general to achieve their goal in communication effectively and efficiently. Preceding the discussion, however, the nature of language, literacy and power relationships is introduced.

Key words: *power relations, language, literacy, turn-taking interaction, one-way interaction, institution-based interaction*

The nature of language, literacy and power relationships

Human communication and interaction is a complex process as it not only involves language, but also literacy and power. The term 'language' is used here to indicate 'verbal repertoire', 'mode of discourse', or some other aspects of language as managed for use, including body language, paralanguage and kinesics (Corson 1993; Yule, 2010). 'Language' in this definition is seen as an uncountable entity as 'human language' – the language used by human beings in communication and for other social purposes.

As human affairs are multiple and complex, there are a lot of different ways of using language to suit the demand of respective social practices, including 'who uses the language to whom, for what purpose, how where and when'. Implicit in these 'WH'-interrelated components are certain social orders regarding the ways of saying (or writing), believing, knowing and understanding of participants in any interaction. James Gee (1990, 2005) views the combinations of 'saying (or writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing' as 'Discourses' (with a capital 'D'), which is more than just language. Language as mode of discourse (with a little 'd') is part of 'Discourse'. More elaborately, Gee defines a Discourse as:

> a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a social meaningful group or 'social network', or to signal (that one is applying) a socially meaningful 'role' (1990: 143).

As human capacity and interaction is so limited, a man or woman can only have a few memberships among the enormous number of memberships throughout societies in the world. This phenomenon reflects a lot of distinctive sorts and levels of 'literacy' people may possess. This idea is in line with what Gee (1990, 2005) points out that 'literacy is always multiple; there are many *literacies*, each of which involves control of Discourses involving print'. Thus, the definition of literacy as the ability to read and write (UNESCO in Hirsch, 1989), disregarding other skills, which has imprinted our mind as language and literacy teachers so far, is not enough for the coverage of this term and so may mislead our teaching practices. Alternatively, modern literacy experts recommend that literacy be viewed as the skill to read and write in a broad sense, not only limited to print, but also including the ability to read the world and to produce information in any form, In addition, literacy also involves social and cultural awareness to suit a Discourse (s) where it is used.

From the explanation above, we can conclude that literacy is not the same as language; even, 'Discourse' itself is controlled by literacy. Literacy is mastery or control over Discourse, including language. Using Luke's terms (1994), literacy is 'social technology' belonging to a certain cultural group, reflecting how the people in the social community organizes their interaction to meet their goals optimally. Even if we want to limit the scope of literacy only to 'language literacy' which more reflects the mastery of the four language skills, by emphasizing on reading and writing as an indicator of 'school literacy', the broad coverage of literacy is still dealt with as language is inevitably functional only in social practices.

In communication or interaction, language and literacy are inseparable. For later discussion, therefore, although the term 'literacy' is not mentioned, it always exists in every opportunity of language use. What we can observably deduce, however, is that someone uses language in a Discourse based on the sort and level of his literacy.

In an interaction between or among participants, what is evident is the presence of relationship between/among them, which may be symmetrical or asymmetrical. What is present in the relationship is called 'power'; accordingly the relationship of this kind can be termed 'power relation' and the result of this relationship felt by the participants is the 'power effects'. Likewise, we can say that power does not belong to anyone or any group; it is not a possession. Fairclough (1989: 43) states that power is never permanently possessed by anybody or any social group, since it can be seized and enacted only in and through social struggles in which it may also be lost. In addition to this opinion, Corson (1993: 1) remarks that:

> …all kinds of power are directed, mediated, or resisted through language. For most everyday human purposes, power is exerted through verbal channels: language is the vehicle for identifying, manipulating, and changing power relations between people.

Viewing from the two scholars' opinion, it is apparent that power is not just a by-product of interaction which may seem unimportant. On the contrary, it constitutes an essential part of communication. It is probably the reason why many experts focus on how power is exercised through language when discussing the relationship of language/literacy and power, instead of how language/literacy plays a role which produces power. According to Moon (2001), power indicates the capacity of participants of one social group to

impinge on or influence (even unconsciously) participants of another social group due to socially created differences between them.

Power-language relations in turn-taking interaction

What I mean by 'turn-taking interaction' here, as the phrase indicates, is interaction in which participants take turns in producing speech acts, while in such turns, the speech acts produced show different qualities of power. In this ease, power domination, may move from one participant to another, regardless of his/her group membership. Even, in such a mode of interaction, a participant who assumes him/herself belonging to a lower Discourse, may struggle to exert his/her influence, or otherwise gives up from the beginning. Another term such a 'face-to-face' interaction cannot congruently represent this king of interaction because it excludes other turn-taking interaction modes such as phone conversation, e-mail direct exchange, etc. while including one-way communication, for example, lecturing, briefing etc. which takes place face-to-face.

The use of language in this sort of interaction does determine the change and movement of power relations between participants. Opportunities for 'rational communication and debate' (Fairclough 1989: 75) which can minimize, even eliminate the power of institutions behind the participants can readily occur during a turn-taking interaction. It is the quality of the speech acts which qualifies the power position and relationships between participants. The quality of speech acts in a rational communication can be measured by the degree of participants' achieving the 'Cooperative Principle', as promoted by Grice (1975, quoted in Mey, 1993: 65-66; Cutting, 2002: 35-44), which consists of four maxims:

Quantity	: Make your contribution as informative as required
Quality	: Do not say what you believe to be false
Relation	: Be relevant
Manner	: Be perspicuous
	Avoid obscurity of expression
	Be orderly

In other words, the four maxims can be put together a follows: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage in which it occurs, by the expected purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged".

In contemporary educational contexts which support egalitarianism, schools are more functional as facilitative institutions (and so the teachers are facilitators) which facilitate learners toward achieving their goals. Therefore, the school policies might constitute a product of top-down and bottom-up negotiation. In a teacher-learner turn-taking interaction, it would appear that the teacher (as the institutionally more powerful) is trying to be more moderate and accommodative of the learner's rights although the learner may be in a wrong position in which the teacher (or another authority) is inspecting him/her. Now, let us see an example of turn-taking interaction in an educational EFL context in Indonesia – a student (S) was reading his paper in front of his teacher (T) who is examining him. Finding one phrase in the reading which sounds idiosyncratic, the teacher interrupted and the conversation started.

(1) S :   (reading) Long-life education
(2) T :   No, it isn't 'long-life education'. It must be 'life-long education'.
(3) S :   Why so, sir? 'Life' is a noun, isn't it? If we want to form a noun phrase with an adjective modifier, the adjective should be before the noun. In this case, in my opinion, 'long-life' is true, not 'life-long' as you said.
(4) T :   No, it that case, it must be 'life-long'.
(5) S :   But, why? Why could a noun be put before an adjective. It violates the rule.
(6) T :   In this case, 'life-long' is adjectival or adjective phrase, while the noun which this phrase modifies is 'education'. Does it make sense?
(7) S :   … Well, yes.
(Jazadi, 1995: 68-69)

Although T still maintains his controlling position, S has really been trying to exert more control over the discourse than one might expect. He also exceeds his discoursal rights. First, the discourse in which the conversation is embedded is of examination. The discourse order set up by T for S is actually *reading a paper*, explaining it, and answering T's questions, while T may interrupt anytime he feels necessary. T does not expect any argumentation whatsoever because he just intends to correct S' grammar and then lets S continue his reading before entering the next phase. In fact, they have spent too much time for that unexpected discussion. Second, as shown in turn 3, S has debated T, initially by asking T's correction, and

further by giving explanation based on his understanding on the matter which shows his disagreement to T's opinion. In turn 5, he further questions T which has led him to answer it (turn 6) which he actually has tried to avoid, as shown in turn 4.

From this example, we can clearly see how turn-takings enable movement of power between participants to take place although S is both hierarchically lower and substantially incorrect. T, who is institutionally higher, has let S talk while he pays attention, instead of directly stopping him from arguing and asking him to follow the discourse order. In connection with S' behavior, Fairclough (1989: 70) calls this as 'social struggle', which not only describes a particular situation, but also reflects on a similar phenomenon in institutional and societal levels. The student seems typical of many other critical students or people in general, while the choice of solidary treatment the teacher uses is seemingly quite standard for coping with this kind of situation in educational contexts, even in life setting in general nowadays.

Power-language relations in one-way interaction

The second template where we can observe language-power relationship is in a (primarily) one-way interaction, through oral and written modes. The oral channel involves speeches, briefing, etc. The nature of this communication is that anyone or any social group who has the chance to talk (producing speech acts) dominates the turn nearly 100%. He/she may consider any symptom/response that comes from the audience (if any) if it is helpful to him/her. The discourse order, in fact, assumes that the audience is silent (just listen) during the speech production. Compared with turn-taking interaction discussed previously, this mode of interaction provides more opportunity for anyone to muster his/her power, to provide a comprehensive exposure of the message so that the audience not only will share the message rationally, but may also be dissolved into the Discourse of the speaker who is always trying to attract them.

Let us take an example of an Australian outspoken politician, Pauline Hanson, who had shaken Australian political arena for a few months some years ago. Although her speeches were not relevant and supportive to the tending future development of Australia and despite her previous background of a simple village woman, she had succeeded in generating particular interest among many people and media. Since her speech debut on the political stage was responded to by the majority of people with silence or little seriousness, through her speeches, she had grown stronger and stronger day by day.

Moreover, the written mode of this one-way interaction takes forms of mass media (TV, radio, film, newspaper, magazine and internet), correspondence, placards, textbooks, fictions, etc. in this case, participants (text producers and the audience) are separated in time and place. Messages exposed through these media are used to mould individual and public opinion; they are offered as alternative truth to be possessed by people. In both modes, oral and written, conclusively, the exercise of power is highly dominant; yet, the consuming participants (or perhaps the producing participants as well) are not aware of it. In other words, the power relations seem to be quite hidden and so we also call it 'hidden power' (Fairclough 1989: 49).

In an educational system, the use of one-way exposure by teachers (or any other authority) can strengthen their powerful position to their students. Nonetheless, as human life pattern has been changed to a more democratic and egalitarian way of treating other social counterparts, the trend of social interaction has also shifted from a power-based to a solidarity-based system (Brown and Gilman 1972: 107). This is caused by the relatively increasing power on the part of the formerly powerless people or social groups (working class, students, etc.) which forces those in higher hierarchies to adapt themselves so that they can still be accepted and appreciated with their institutional power (Fairclough, 1989: 72; Smith, 1992).

Likewise, educational contexts as part of social interaction have tended toward a learner-centered system. In relation to a one-way treatment by teachers to their students, teachers no more abuse their power by showing how powerful they are or how powerless students are, but they try to accommodate as much reasoning as possible so that they do not set themselves up as foolish power-holders, but knowledgably rational ones, and so they are greatly accepted as cooperative counterparts while they still maintain their

position. Let us observe a piece of text: a feedback of an assignment from a lecturer (J) to her student (I) in a Master course of an Australian university (author's data).

Feedback on Assignment One Credit

Your work is very well structured and clearly presented and on the whole shows a strong grasp of relevant sociolinguistic theory. The instances were well chosen as objects of reflection, and your analyses made interesting reading for me as you attempted to explore intercultural relations in the speech instances.

There is just one fuzzy area in your work that I would like to clarify with you. This your interpretation of 'meaning potential' which you seem to be using as if it meant 'the range of meanings which a listener or analyst might attribute to a particular utterance/speech act.' What Halliday means by it is rather 'the range of meanings which members of a speech community might expect to be available in a particular *situation type*.' It is not the material speech act which carries meaning potential but the abstract concept of a situation type.

Your written English language expression and depth of analysis are both much advanced on the thesis you showed me. Congratulations. Nevertheless (or perhaps precisely because of this) I have made a number of suggestions which I believe will be helpful to you in continuing along the path of academic writing.

Can you try to remember page numbers next time please?

This is a high Credit, [I], and I hope to see you gaining Distinctions in due course.

[J]

In the first part, J is trying to reinforce her student (I) by telling all the positive sides of I's work, involving the structure, clarity, instance selection and her enjoyment in reading it. In the next part, although J is critical of some blurred part of I's work, she has not mentioned a contradictory transitional work, which again mitigates I from feeling less appreciated. Again, in paragraph three, J salutes I's work and congratulates him. What is interesting of her solidarity is in the next sentence when she alternates the contradictory word 'nevertheless' with bracketed 'perhaps precisely because of this' to show that her correction is more for making perfect rather than common correction, which sounds an exaggeration. Last, she uses first names to show that there were as if no power gap s in such feedback.

All in all, we can imagine how J is accepted and appreciated by her students (in this case, I), including her institutionally 'uncontestable' decision of grading as she institutionalizes it in bold on the top of the paper which is so much hidden that I may have never thought as institutionalized power. We can also imagine how I is dissolved to the Discourse of J as he never has any turn to counter argue or comment even with a sigh 'oh' so that he can, in some way, be strong with his own Discourse – in opposition to J's. This is indeed the strength of this so-called one-way interaction.

Language-power relations in institution-based interactions

In addition to the two templates of language-power relationship above, I discuss the third one, which I term 'institution-based interaction'. As a matter of fact, 'institution', which consists of non-language attributes which accompany participants, is always present in both turn-taking and one-way modes of interaction. Similarly, whenever I discuss these, I can never take the institution away from the participants. However, there is a time when rational communication does not work very well, when solidarity-based interaction is not effective, usually what is salient in the interaction is 'institution', that is, participants base their exchange of information solely on the particular institution behind them. This is the emphasis I am concerned with here.

This institution-based interaction usually refers to practices and discourse types which are globally embraced and necessarily followed in which within them there are organized knowledge and values, social relationship and social identities. When participants solely stick their interaction on this sort of practices, what they convey are no more reflective of entities 'within' themselves which are dynamic, creative and innovative, but those 'around' (behind, in front, beside) them which are relatively static and conventional. Language used in this kind of interaction varies in accordance with the sorts of practices and discourse types, and power relations also no more correspond to individual participants, but the institutions which the

individuals stand for. Even, sometimes there is a tendency in some way that individuals are only the mediation for the institution to manifest in the real life. As in the following expressions:

(1) In *my capacity as the director of the program*, I would like to …..

(2) For me personally, there is no problem, I can provide what you request. But, *in relation to this 'chair'*, I can't, everything has its procedure.

In the first expression, the text producer does not represent him/herself a free individual, but an institution which implies all his/her commitments, responsibilities and authorities. His/her language use and power relations with the audience are how a personality is split, as a free being and as a bound one. As a free individual, he/she can possibly take a lot of initiatives (as the manifestation of his/her creativity and dynamism), but as he/she is tied to the job regulation, he/she has to follow the practices which have been legitimated. This type of interaction usually prevails in bureaucracy and administration matters. It also includes practices in formal and solemn occasions such as prayers, ceremonies and festivals wherein the participants solely follow the roles being appointed to them.

In educational contexts today, particularly in teacher-learner relationship, this kind of interaction has tended to become minimal. Take for example the 'assignment feedback' in the previous section. It is actually institution-based, but the teacher (J) has deinstitutionalized it so that what is dominant is no more the institution, but egalitarianism. However, for administrative purposes, institution-based treatment is still applied in an education system because there is no other alternative which seems conceivable. This all indicates how multiple our life is. On the one hand, we promote egalitarianism, but on the other we have to maintain structuralism. These multiple relationships reflect the various dimensions of power which are realized in language and literacy practices.

CONCLUSION

Language, literacy and power are inseparable; these three always exist in every opportunity of language use although with different quality in each other. I have so far discussed three templates of language, literacy and power relationships by emphasizing and taking examples from educational contexts in a modern society. It is implicit that as the civilization progresses, humanist factors become more valued and appreciated, as is shown by the availability of rational communication and solidarity-based interaction. However, hierarchical relations are still maintained, which are intended to support certain aspects of human life and to balance the freedom of every human being in nudging with each and one another.

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