

## **Building a Discursive Perspective: Classroom Interaction and Construction of Social-Cultural Identity**

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**ABSTRACT :** *Classroom is a space where students involve themselves in various discussions as directly being the participants or as indirectly being spectators. Their socio-cultural identities are deeply impacted during these classroom interactions. There has been a very less amount of focus on this link between classroom interactions and their impact on construction of socio-cultural identity of students. This paper attempts to build a perspective and empirical framework for investigating the same issue. It is argued that this can be enquired into with the help of ‘critical discourse analysis’ theory provided by ‘Norman Fairclough’. Present article is an attempt to understand the need for a new critical framework for studying the link between classroom interactions and construction of socio-cultural identity of students. It has been concluded that language is seen as a social tool for hegemonic control in Fairclough’s theory, and hence his framework provides a valuable perspective in investigating classroom interactions from a critical viewpoint.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Classroom interactions, construction of Socio-cultural identity, Critical Discourse Analysis, Fairclough*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Knowing about oneself and the world around is one of the major developmental issues in educational research. When children enter into the social world outside their families they have already acquired a sense of self. This sense is built upon interpersonal acquaintances of the child such as experiences inside the school, which consist of interactions between the student and the teacher. Engagement in such interactions results in experiences for students that impact positively or negatively on their socio-cultural identities. This paper is an attempt to understand the idea and the theoretical constructs proposed around the idea of the influence of classroom interactions on the construction of socio-cultural identity of students inside the classroom. This is enquired into within the framework of Fairclough’s theory of ‘Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)’. First, an attempt is made to construct a comprehensive view of the socio-constructivist nature of classroom interaction and its relation to construction of socio-cultural identity of students. Second, it has been tried to look at discourse as a significant perspective to study the question of concern at present. Last, it is discussed how Fairclough (1989, 1995, 2003) presents a wholesome perspective in the same respect and his theory of ‘Critical discourse analysis’ is further deployed to study co-construction of identity and knowledge inside a classroom context.

### **II. TEACHING, CLASSROOM INTERACTION AND CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY**

To understand the relationship between teaching, classroom interaction and how they get constructed in the social plane, various models already exist in literature. Researchers have shown how children engage in linguistic interactions with the learned others and the culture at large to build understanding (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner 1996). Their findings emphasized the role of society and language. Recent commentators have tried addressing this issue from various research or developmental perspectives (Wells, 2000; Barnes 1993; Applebbe et al 2003). However, a strong case remains for greater efforts at understanding effective teaching by focusing on discursive aspects of classroom interaction. This point will be dealt later in the paper.

Further building the role of classroom teaching and its social constructivist nature in identity construction of students which is the main area of concern at present, various researchers such as Pollard and Filer (1996, 1999) and Wells (2000) have presented well informed studies. But they have not pursued this in depth focusing on impact of classroom interaction on constructions of identity inside the classroom. One can see a dearth of research in the area of classroom interactions having role in students’ construction of socio-cultural identity. Before delving into the topic further, it is important to understand how exactly language comes to play this central role in investigating construction of socio-cultural identity inside the classroom. Languages are not just exclusively about communication; languages convey ideologies, thoughts, images, and even politics (Van Dijk, 1985; Fairclough, 1989).

The ways we communicate, both influence and are influenced by the forces of contemporary social institutions. The main reason to focus classroom interaction is to highlight role of language in exercising of power in a classroom context. Walsh (2011) expounded upon the significance of understanding classroom language and discourse and their impact on students' construction of identities, which is the key question to be explored at present.

### **III. CLASSROOM IDENTITY AND THE STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION**

Taylor (1994) explicated on this most imperative question; how one forms the identity. According to him, how others 'recognize' us becomes central to the formation of our identity by negatively or positively being a part of it. He explained "Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence (pp- 25). Further, he proposed Mead's (1934) construct of 'significant other' as the basic scaffold to understand the significance of others' role in constructing one's identity. For him, genesis of the human mind accomplishes itself by interaction with the society. Cooley (1992) referred to this process as the 'looking-glass self', where others serve as 'mirrors' which reflect the images of self and therefore affect construction of identity for that particular self. By contextualizing this issue of recognition in the field of education, Bingham (2001) maintained that in schools, individuals (students, teachers, staff and parents) interact in ways that reflect positive or negative views of each other, that further fuels the processes of recognition and misrecognition. Discourses of recognition, from the perspective of student groups who typically see themselves as marginalized in a school setting, provide a viable medium for understanding recognition in relation to formation of identity (Jenlink and Townes, 2009).

Further expounding upon this, Jenlink and Townes (2009) illustrate another issue of 'affirming politics of recognition inside the classroom' (pp. 14). The affirmation of diversity is concerned with cultural and social visibility and invisibility. They explained that society "...categorizes people according to both visible and invisible traits, uses such classifications to deduce fixed behavioral and mental traits" (pp. 36). Such discrimination yields a destructive force that affects the identity of individuals. In schools and classrooms, teachers are confronted with invisibility as a moral and social issue. Explicating on same, Delpit (1988) showed how a black male student of another community was separated from the rest of the class, because he was always expected to behave in certain manners which did not match with the cultural and social learning of his own community. Researchers have shown strong links between learner's identity and classroom interactions. However, a research based specific link between classroom interactions, their discursive constructions and the development of a positive socio-cultural identity has not been developed yet (Stables, 2003). There is particularly a dearth of research illuminating the broader concern via micro-level analysis of classroom interaction with reference to discursive perspective. Robert Young (1992) argued for 'framework of discourse in the field of education' which he considers as more coherent and critical view in analyzing classroom interactions. Discourse studies, according to him, provide a significant perspective for the same. Also researchers such as Adger (200) and Stables (2003) have asserted that classroom interaction entails the social construction of meaning; therefore 'discursive perspective' has the potential to provide conceptual frameworks for understanding development through conversations.

### **IV. DISCOURSE AS A SIGNIFICANT CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE IN CLASSROOM RESEARCH**

'Discourse' as explained by Fairclough (2003), focuses upon language as determined by social practices. Explaining this, he gives three features: "Firstly, that language is a part of society, and not somehow external to it; secondly, that language is a social process; thirdly that language is a socially conditioned process" (Fairclough, 1989, pp- 22-23). Looking at language as construed by society, the problems addressed in discourse research aim to answer, what information is contained in interactions and how the social context in which an utterance is used acts upon the meaning of the individual utterances. In discourse studies, there can be noticed a segregation of approaches as 'critical' and 'non-critical' (Fairclough, 1989). Critical approaches believe in understanding construction of power equations and social dominance within its purview of analyzing discourse. Using Gramsci's (1971) concept of 'hegemony', Adger (2001) talked about how discourses are constructed to reproduce control over certain section of the society. Investigation of the concern presented in this paper has been done with a critical approach towards the issue because construction of socio-cultural identity as discourse has been scrutinized and inspected as a ground for maintaining social power by commanding strata of the society. Having similarities with regard to agenda, schools of critical discourse analysis (CDA) differ according to their theoretical orientations. This paper attempts to introduce one particular approach to CDA; however an attempt has been made to discuss other approaches in brief. Tenorio (2011) introduced some basic approaches in CDA. Referring Fairclough's approach as 'dialectical-relational', he maintained that dominance and power play in semiotic construction of society was the main focus of Fairclough's orientation towards discourse analysis. Therefore, methodologically, 'critical language awareness' was seen as quintessential in studying discourse.

Second is, Van Dijk's 'socio-cognitive discourse analysis'. It began in formal text linguistics but subsequently incorporated elements of standard psychological model of memory and cognitive science. Although his focus is also on power dynamics on the society (his construct of K-device), Tenorio also believed that the methodological conclusions of his theory are not very clear. Third is, 'discourse-historical approach' introduced by Wodak and colleagues. Its focus remains on historical structure of knowledge which allows less incorporation of micro-level analysis of discursive construction in a particular social set-up. Fourth is, 'dispositive analysis' introduced by Foucault's work. It investigates institutional structuring of discourses but does not enquire into interactional aspects to study discourse. According to Henderson (2005), Fairclough's approach to CDA criticizes "positivist aspects of sociolinguistics, the individualism promoted in pragmatics and a lack of consideration for context in conversation analysis" (pp-3). In attempting to overcome these limitations, Fairclough brings together linguistically-oriented discourse analysis and social thought relevant to discourse and language. This makes his approach most suitable to study discursive interactional patterning of the society in research fields like education. The following section attempts to explore basic tenets of his theory and understand their application in understanding construction of socio-cultural identity during classroom interactions.

## **V. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIO-CULTURAL IDENTITY DURING CLASSROOM INTERACTIONS**

Fairclough (1992) provides a well-knit framework to analyze the discourse. The framework can be divided under two subheadings; 'intertextuality and text analyses'. The term 'intertextuality' was coined by Kristeva in late 1960s and can be understood as a methodological approach by Bakhtin's work on critical language (1986). Intertextuality points to the reproduction of past speeches in present speech acts with contemporary issues and requirements, but this power of voicing the needs with assertions is not available to all groups of a society (Fairclough 1992). Exploring the meanings that are created during this intertextual process helps in attaining understanding of underlying authoritative forces that control society (Van Dijk, 2001). Teachers' and text book explanations allow flourishing a particular social understanding of the reality outside amongst students, which further impact their construction of socio-cultural identity. Van Dijk (1987) talked about various ethnic prejudices that social science books of secondary schools in Netherlands created amongst children. Whenever the group of minorities was talked about, prominent references of crimes and violence around them are also mentioned simultaneously. Though Van Dijk's focus wasn't on intertextual analysis, but his study very well explicates the concept intertextuality empirically.

Fairclough (1989), talks about manifestation of intertextuality in text in terms of discourse representation, presupposition, negation, and metadiscourse. What, where and how past speeches are quoted creates significant changes in discourse representation. Presuppositions are propositions which are taken by the producer of the text as already established or 'given'. Negative sentences carry special types of presupposition which also work intertextually, incorporating other texts only in order to contest and reject them. In metadiscourse, the text producer distances herself from some level of the text, treating distanced level as if it were another, external, text. This has interesting implications for the relationship between discourse and identity (Fairclough, 1992). Fairclough focused on 'interactional control system' in the same regard. He talked about topic control, setting and policing the agenda of the talk in the beginning itself and metaphoric usage. Following episodes explicate on some of the analytical categories given by Fairclough: Teacher- This page contains some sources of water. You people read it quickly and mark where you get the drinking water from... is there anybody who has filled something else than from the water from the tap. That's the usual answer, we all get water from there. So there is nothing much to discuss about that.

The teacher in the beginning itself assumed that every child present in the class must have a tap at least. This 'presupposition' over the part of teacher is an example of overgeneralization and states her narrowed view of reality. Following is another episode which talks about Fairclough's concept of metadiscourse:

Teacher: let's come to this report on page 70, it is written... "17 November, 2007- thousands of children studying in the municipal corporation schools in Delhi suffer from anemia.... so as you see, this is a survey about government school children. They do not get to eat properly.. Moreover these people don't have the right kind of knowledge what to eat what not to eat." "...Poor girl used to do a lot of part time jobs like working in the nearby fish factory, also working as garbage pickers.... You must have all noticed these people who collect some papers" Metadiscursive analysis suggests that the usage of the word 'these people' by the teacher have put her at a distant position from government school children, further encouraging discrimination among students. A number of possible macro-micro links could be posited as motivating teachers' narratives in these episodes; socially, economically and culturally distanced and 'better' lives of the people of city; good schools v/s government schools; our well to do families v/s their non-stable struggling families; their problems v/s our

facilities etc. One can notice how the interactional analysis suggested by Fairclough unfolds many implicit assumptions of the teacher with regard to the society which further impacts students' socio-cultural identities significantly.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Understanding politics of recognition as well as its impact on identity formation during interactions inside the classroom requires embracing a critical pedagogical approach to teaching. This critical approach necessarily needs to be concerned with a focus on social justice and a discussion of historical and contemporary inequalities (Jenlick and Townes, 2009). Fairclough's critical discourse analysis provides a suitable framework for the same. It has been shown with the help of examples how his structure's analytical tools help in uncovering the implicit assumptions tacit in the interactions inside the classroom. The paper attempted to build a discursive perspective for understanding construction of socio-cultural identity of students inside the classroom from Fairclough's theory of CDA.

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