

Challenging Dominant Discourse Systems in the EFL/ESL Classroom

ESL/EFL 教室における重要な談話システムへの挑戦

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言語教室で言語が持つ深い力にもっと強調する必要があります。重要な談話システムと功利主義、企業文化、プロフェッショナリズム、ジェンダーのイデオロギーへの停滞から離れる必要があります、これらの談話システムが人の考え方や視点やコミュニケーションのやり方にどういう風に影響を与えるか認めるべきです。教室では、コミュニケーションモードのステレオタイプは勿論強化されるべきではありませんが、様々な談話システムを認めて、違いの認識を促すことは非常に有益になるでしょう。これは難しい挑戦に思えるかもしれません、教室での活動と言語の焦点の範囲を広げることで達成できます。これができるれば、学生は談話の多様性から学んで、視野を広げる事がで出来るし、使用し吸収する言語のもっと深い意味合いをよく理解出来るようになります。さらに彼らが交流する人々やコミュニティも、彼らの新鮮な視点から恩恵を受け、理想的には彼らからも学ぶでしょう。

There needs to be more of a focus on the deeper powers that language possesses in the language classroom. There needs to be less stagnant conformity to the dominant discourse systems and ideologies of utilitarianism, corporate culture, professionalism, and gender and more variety and awareness in the way these discourse systems affect how we see the world and communicate. In the classroom, stereotyping of modes of communication should not be reinforced, but paying attention to different discursive tendencies and encouraging awareness of differences will be highly profitable. This may seem a great challenge and to be overcomplicating what is already a difficult profession, but this can be achieved through simply broadening the range of activities and language focus in the classroom. If this can be done, students will benefit from a greater diversity of discourse and comprehend better the deeper implications of the language they use and absorb. The people and communities they interact with will also benefit from their fresh perspectives and understanding, and ideally learn from them as well.

キーワード

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Language and culture are tightly intertwined, but this does not mean one should dispose of his/her own culture when using another language and conform to a new one. Teaching English or any other language as a second language is an inter-cultural affair, and most language teachers have likely at some point thought about how culture affects pedagogy, learning, and language, or at least tried to teach something ‘cultural’ in class. However, the problem with teaching culture is that culture means different things to different people. It covers so much ground that it is difficult to define, let alone teach. One way that teachers can be more focused in their approach is to zone in on more specific factors that affect how we communicate and think about discourse systems. There are a great number of different factors that influence language, such as age, interests, social background, or class, but this essay will focus on just four elements. Firstly, we will look at one of the most far-reaching discourse systems – the utilitarian discourse system. Then we will examine the corporate discourse system, paying attention to how business culture and language interact before moving on to the professional discourse system, specifically examining academic language within an educational context. Finally, we will explore gender discourse systems and power relations within ideologies of gender. Throughout we will assess how students and teachers can benefit from a greater awareness of these systems and how they can be implemented in the classroom.

It would seem that the most expansive and pervasive discourse system of the four, at least in the western world, is the utilitarian discourse system. Utilitarianism developed during the renaissance period as an alternative set of morals to those derived from the dogma of Christianity and established an ideology that doing whatever causes the greatest amount of benefit or happiness or good for the largest number of people is just and moral (Scollon, Scollon, and Jones, 2012, p. 115). It focuses on the individual as the basis of society and as the key unit of economic force, which is a key point of contrast with other discourse systems, most famous of which is the Confucian discourse system, which tends to focus more on group harmony, societal and family relationships, and historically or traditionally based morals (Scollon et al. 2012, p. 195). These discourse systems of course can have a big impact on the way one communicates. When, for example, giving personal opinions in a group situation, someone more influenced by utilitarian ideology may be more forward, direct and bold, and unhesitatingly lay his or her thoughts on the table, while someone more representative of Confucian ideals will be more hesitant and may adjust or soften their opinion to avoid conflict or disagreement (Scollon et al. 2012, p. 138). This is something I and many other teachers of Japanese students will have experienced. After setting speaking activities such as debates or discussions that involved giving opinions or disagreeing I have in the past felt frustrated at students’ lack of participation, non-

committal, vague expressions, or long bouts of tentative silence, and I would begin to doubt my teaching ability or their comprehension of the task, until eventually I realised that this was a cultural difference, or more specifically, they were participating in a different form of discourse. This is not to say that all Japanese people are more Confucian in how they communicate, and stereotypes should of course be avoided as all people are participants in a number of overlapping discourse systems that affect how they interact (Scollon, et al. 2012). The important thing for teachers is to be aware of different ways of communicating, to make students also aware of these differences, and to give them a variety of language tools that they can use for whatever discourse systems they participate in, rather than only giving them a limited selection of linguistic patterns of behaviour influenced by what the teacher or whoever wrote the textbook is accustomed to. Due to the persistent pedestal placement of so-called ‘native speaker’ teachers and textbooks made in the United Kingdom and The United States, TESOL has largely been dominated by utilitarian discourse, and if language teachers are to properly equip students for the ever-globalising world where more and more discourse systems are intersecting, there needs to be more variety and awareness in the language we teach. So, for example, instead of setting a discussion activity where students must explicitly agree or disagree and clearly state their opinions (*I agree / I disagree / I think... / In my opinion...*), other strategies involving tentativeness, balance, or deference could be introduced (*I'm not sure / This is a difficult problem / On one hand...*) and students could role play different ways of interacting in the discussion. Perhaps they could take turns playing more dominant or more deferential characters through a role-play of a company meeting or a family discussion. Of course, students will benefit from learning about communicative expectations in foreign cultures, and it will likely be valuable to practice stepping out of their comfort zones and trying to be more direct and assertive, for example, but this does not mean that they should be forced to wear a cultural mask at all times and hide their own valuable discourse systems.

This western, native-speaker driven, utilitarian dominance has also created a narrow view of what is usually called ‘Business English’, which often neglects the various other ways people communicate in business, or in other words, other corporate discourse systems. This one-sidedness does not correlate to the globalised business world where more and more companies are interacting internationally, and communicative problems can arise because of this. For example, company members engaging in an international business meeting may encounter difficulty when there are different expectations of the structure of the meeting (Pan, Scollon, & Scollon, 2002, p. 125). Company cultures under a more utilitarian influence may encourage employees to use each other’s first names, to create a more personal and individually-focused

tone, whereas in Japanese companies, employees normally always use each other's family names with the suffix *-san* or *-kun* to indicate their relative hierarchical position, or they may even just refer to each other with their job titles without using names at all. Eye contact for many Westerners is seen as a sign of attentiveness and respect, whereas some Japanese people may feel awkward under extended eye contact and it can be interpreted as a challenge to their authority. Within Japanese is the polite sub-language *keigo*, commonly used in business, which is often spoken in a softer tone, and so using a more self-assured or lower tone when speaking with Japanese people, may be interpreted as a sign of arrogance or impoliteness. In my classes I often encourage students to use eye contact when speaking to each other to show that they are listening. However, I also make a point of comparing this expectation to what they are most likely used to in Japan, and point out that people who have become accustomed to both tendencies change between making more or less eye-contact depending on who they are speaking to. When teaching business English classes it may be beneficial to look at different formats of meetings and let students practice each kind. Whatever kind of discourse is taught, and a variety is surely going to be of value, it is important to meet the needs of the students and have them learn modes of discourse appropriate for their own specific communicative goals.

English is the number one language used for academic research in the world, and it is the language by which academics from a huge variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds are able to contribute to academia on the international stage. However, this diversity contrasts heavily with the very limited range of acceptable formats and styles in English academic writing. As Benesch (1993, p. 710) points out, EAP (English for Academic Purposes) fails to question academic norms and instead students are expected to assimilate to academic culture rather than challenge and adapt it with different forms of professional discourse. This argument is echoed by Santos (1992) who states ESL writing has remained distanced from ideological concerns, and also Pennycook, who argues ESL and EAP are utilitarian, conservative and pragmatic in orientation and focus too much on simplistic language needs involving activities that only provide motivation for communication, and ignore personal, contextual, and cultural relationships (1994, p. 13). This limits the students in how they can express themselves through academic writing, and hence establishes a lack of diversity in academic research, and fresh perspectives and styles that could be beneficial to the subject are shut out. One only has to look at the marking criteria for essays at a university or major international English exam to see how this conformity in professional discourse is enforced. The IELTS (International English Language Testing System) exam has distinct criteria in the writing section that state that the

students must answer the essay question clearly in the introduction and provide evidence in the following paragraphs. In other words, the essays must be deductive in style and adhere to utilitarian values of focusing on information and explicit clarity. Of course, from a pragmatic point of view, having a standardised set of marking criteria makes it much easier for the marker to score the test, but there may be certain subjects and topics that could benefit from more inductive styles of writing, or discourse methods that appeal to morals and values rather than information and factual evidence. These expectations may or may not be familiar to students in an ESL classroom, and as Crozet and Liddicoat (2000, p. 10) point out: "The language learner needs to access the cultural underpinnings of the texts as much as s/he needs to access the language which encodes them." This is something that can be achieved in the language classroom through contrast by studying a variety of different styles of text from a variety of sources, such as essays or stories or poems that have been translated from other languages or written by non-native English speakers. Instead of clearly stating the writer's opinion in a thesis statement at the beginning of an essay and backing it up with supporting paragraphs, a more balanced approach could be practised, where students examine two sides of an argument evenly, and may not state a definitive conclusion. Of course, this will depend on how much freedom the teacher has to diversify as most EAP courses are expected to prepare students for the structural requirements of English university courses. However, encouraging students to express themselves through their own cultural influences instead of conforming to Western-dominated ones, will bring valuable variety to the academic world.

Undoubtedly gender is another major factor that influences the way we communicate, but in inspecting this phenomenon it is important to see gender not as a simple biological matter, but one of negotiated power relations (Davis, & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004, p. 386). As Schmenk (2004, p. 514) puts it:

"Instead of looking at what males are like and what females are like and constructing generalised images of male and female language learners as groups accordingly, critical voices note that language learners are themselves constantly engaged in constructing and reconstructing their identities in specific contexts and communities."

So as a language teacher, it may be best to avoid telling students that *men say this* and *women say that*, and instead focus on specific ways these identities are constructed in communicative relationships and different modes of discourse that will allow them to better understand this. This all may sound very complicated for a classroom of language learners, but this

can be taught very easily by giving specific communicative goals within a task. The key point here is to be aware that different people may display more feminine or more masculine discursive tendencies in different contexts and the language teacher and language students need to be aware of these differences. This is not to say that masculine and feminine tendencies should be categorised and perpetuated, only that students should be given exposure to and be aware of a variety of these discursive tendencies. One such difference between masculine and feminine modes of communication can be seen when responding to the others' problems in conversation. Research has shown people who identify as male have a tendency to try and give advice or instructions in order to fix their conversation partner's problem, and tend to seek this kind of response when sharing problems with others, whereas those who identify as female on the other hand have a tendency to show sympathy when responding to problems, and tend to seek sympathy when sharing problems (Scollon et al. 2012, p. 248). When these different expectations are not understood, miscommunication and problems can arise. A male language teacher, for example, who is not aware of such a variation may only focus on language for giving advice in a learning task and neglect the function of showing or seeking sympathy, and his students will be less equipped and less aware. So, when setting a speaking task on responding to problems or dilemmas, teachers could introduce a variety of language for giving advice (*Why don't you...? / Have you thought about...? / You should...*), and sympathising (*I'm sorry to hear that / That sounds really tough / That's terrible*), as well as any other conversation strategies that might be appropriate. The key for the language teacher is to be self-aware about what discursive tendencies s/he may have and to be careful not to impart only their own tendencies upon their students. Introducing different varieties is the important thing to be aware of. As noted previously, gender is partly a social construction of power relations, and there is an imbalance of power that is interlocked with discourse. As Scollon et al. (2012, p. 248) explain:

“To the extent that one adopts the “male”/utilitarian values of self-sufficiency, status, exclusion, information, contest, and problem-solving expertise, one can be perceived as a member in good standing. On the other hand, to the extent one expresses the opposite poles of these values: intimacy, connection, inclusion, relationship, rapport, community, problem-sharing, and willingness to learn and admit one's mistakes, one is more likely to be taken as a more marginal member of the system.”

As language teachers we must give awareness and importance to these so-called “marginal” values by acknowledging and practising them in the language classroom so we do not further

solidify the imbalance, and our students can be better armed to fight this imbalance and understand others on a deeper level.

In summary, more attention needs to be paid to the deeper implications of language taught in the classroom. There needs to be less stagnant conformity to the dominant discourse systems and ideologies of utilitarianism, corporate culture, professionalism, and gender, and more variety and awareness in the way these discourse systems affect how we see the world and communicate. In the classroom, stereotyping of modes of communication should not be reinforced, but paying attention to different discursive tendencies and encouraging awareness of differences will be highly profitable. This may seem a great challenge and to be overcomplicating what is already a challenging profession, but this can be achieved through simply broadening the range of activities and language focus in the classroom. If this can be done, students will benefit from a greater diversity of discourse and comprehend better the deeper implications of the language they use and absorb. The people and communities they interact with will also benefit from their fresh perspectives and understanding, and ideally learn from them as well.

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