

Classroom Discourse as a Socio-Linguistic Ecosystem: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Indigenous Language Marginalisation and Linguistic Sustainability in Sindhi Education

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Abstract

Classroom discourse is a complex socio-linguistic field where language options, involvement and institutional authority are negotiated in day-to-day pedagogical activities. The methodology adopted in this study is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as developed by Fairclough for analysing the marginalization of indigenous language Sindhi in the multilingual classrooms in spite of its cultural importance. The qualitative research, based on audio-visual recordings of six classroom sessions, transcripts, and field observations from a public sector girls' degree college in Hyderabad, Sindh, shows three interrelated patterns: pupil utterances are limited to the teacher's initiative, learners who are Sindhi dominant cannot be central to the formal response when it is in Urdu or English, and Sindhi is used only in the informal support and not the academic explanation. These findings indicate that linguistic sustainability cannot solely be a policy problem, but one that is dependent on the everyday interactional choices that legitimate or marginalize indigenous languages. This study can provide the contribution to language teaching by making a direct connection between classroom discourse practices and

the vitality of indigenous languages and by promoting inclusive multilingual approaches that view students' full linguistic systems as a resource for learning.

Keywords: Classroom discourse, Critical Discourse Analysis, Linguistic sustainability, Multilingual education, Language ideology, Sindhi, Indigenous language marginalisation

1. Introduction

1.1. Conceptual Foundation

The classroom discourse is an interactive space for the construction of knowledge, the appreciation of languages and the negotiation of learner identities by teachers and learners. The classroom talk is a social practice of structuring participation, authority and access to knowledge, a fact that has been critical of the idea of the classroom talk as a neutral conduit for teaching applied linguistics has long pointed out (Walsh, 2013; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). This is even more striking in relation to multilingual classrooms where a language decision can be a life-and-death issue in relation to whose voice is heard, what constitutes a proper response and whose knowledge is rendered visible institutionally.

In this instance the notions of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) help as they link the use of language with institutional power and ideology (Fairclough, 2003, 2010; van Dijk, 2001). From this perspective, discourse is a product, as well as a reflection, of the social arrangements; and common classroom practices, such as teacher questioning, feedback, correction, code switching and silence can help to create and reproduce language hierarchies even if no-one is actively striving to. This phenomenon is particularly interesting in the case of Sindh, where a major part of the culture is based on Sindhi language and its formal presence in universities is relatively less.

1.2. Language Sustainability and Learning Environment

Sustainability has become more than an environmental concept and now incorporates cultural and linguistic continuity. Linguistic sustainability is the ability of a language to be strong, visible and supported long-term, particularly in the education system. Indigenous languages and regional languages can carry cultural memory, local epistemologies and ways of belonging, and their functional domains can be eroded where formal education is primarily based on the national and/or global language.

Urdu and English are generally used as languages of official mobility, assessment and academic prestige in Pakistan, and the use of other regional languages like Sindhi is sometimes considered as a language of cultural importance but pedagogically less significant (Rahman, 2010; Siddiqui, 2019). However, it is not a matter of the inclusion or not of Sindhi in policy or curriculum documents, but the matter is about its usage, restriction or legitimation in the day-to-day classroom. Such a classroom where concepts are understood in Sindhi, but the use of the language is not encouraged in formal explanations can at the same time compromise participation and the vitality of the language.

1.3. Research Gap and Problem Statement

In Pakistan, multilingual education-related research has been more oriented towards language policy, curriculum, and less focus has been laid on the micro level phenomenon through which the language hierarchy is in fact enacted. What is, however, well known is CDA in the field of research of education and less frequently is linked to the South Asian classroom practice, particularly with respect to issues of language sustainability. This is the juncture this study is situated in and it discusses positioning of Sindhi with Urdu and English in the classroom discourse of a degree college in the public sector in Hyderabad.

1.4. Research Questions

- What is the distribution of the languages Sindhi, Urdu and English in classroom interaction and what do the distribution mean concerning the hierarchy of institutional language?
- What are the types of participation that are seen with various language resources among language learners?
- What are the ways in which classroom discourse practices can reproduce or challenge institutional power relations?
- How are these practices contributing to indigenous language maintenance and language sustainable and inclusive education in Sindh?

1.5. Contribution of the Study

The article has three advances to offer language teaching research. It will provide empirical documentation of marginalisation of the Sindhi language in multilingual interaction in higher

education from classroom settings. It links CDA with the concept of linguistic sustainability, that is, its capacity to shape the vitality of an indigenous language through everyday discourse practices. And it views classroom talk as a 'social-linguistic ecosystem' in which language choosing, power, identity and participation do not stand as separate pedagogic concerns but as part of one and the same.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Critical Discourse, Language Ideology and Learning

According to CDA, language is a social practice in an institutional and ideological context (Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 2001). Fairclough's three-dimensional model can be used to distinguish between the level of text features, the level of discursive practices and the level of wider social practices, allowing analysis to take us from the local wording and turn-taking to the wider structures of power. In classrooms, that range is especially significant because authority is often created in the mundane of interactional practices, rather than by so much as a written policy.

An additional focus of language as a mediating tool is proposed by the sociocultural theory. Vygotsky (1978) and subsequent sociocultural theorists believe that cognition is developed through socially structured activity, where language is the key mediational tool (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Extending that reasoning and imbalanced access to classroom talk suggests imbalanced access to learning as well. The remaining picture is completed by language ideology, which accounts for why some languages are deemed more appropriate, educated or legitimate than others, in the first place (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994; Ochs, 1999).

2.2. Classroom Discourse and Multilingual Education

The literature of classroom discourse (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Walsh, 2013) shows that teacher talk is often the predominant form of formal classroom discourse. The initiation-response-feedback (or initiation-response-evaluation) pattern can be used to control the instruction, but it also limits the amount learners can contribute. This is further complicated by multilingual classrooms, where learners need to not only react to academic content, but also to institutional messages regarding which language is considered appropriate or not.

The stories of translanguaging and flexible multilingual pedagogy are more hopeful – learners' full language repertoires may enable comprehension, participation and identity formation

(Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Garcia & Wei, 2014). But that potential conflicts with institutional practices that favor official or high-status languages. When the home or regional language of a learner is developed as an informal, remedial and/or transitional language; multilingualism becomes a hierarchy rather than a resource.

2.3. South Asian Indigenous Language Marginalization

Once indigenous and regional languages are no longer visible in academic discussions, in teaching and learning evaluations, and in teachers' professional assessments, they are likely to be marginalized in the formal education system (May 2012; Hornberger, 2015). In Pakistan, the symbolic and practical power of Urdu and English have been determinant in the process of access to education and in the construction of identity (Rahman, 2010; Siddiqui, 2019). Here it is useful to consider Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital: the language resources that learners have in keeping with the institutionally valued form means that they are simply more likely to be read as competent participants.

This literature has revealed three general trends: firstly, teacher-centred discourse limits the agency of learners; secondly, dominant languages are given greater weight in the classroom when it comes to academic authority; and thirdly, classroom interaction mirrors wider social hierarchies. What remains to be explored is how these tendencies relate to the sustainability of language, per se. In this study, Sindhi is treated similarly, as not only a language that students speak, but as an institutional resource, whose vitality is determined by repeated uses of discourse which happen session by session.

3. General Discussion

3.1. Research Design and Analytical Framework

This is a qualitative study with the approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) based on Fairclough's three dimensional model of analysis. The analytical framework was performed at three levels: Text level, Code switching and Turn taking, Discursive-practice level, Teacher-student interaction and participation routines and Social-practice level, Institutional language hierarchy in Sindh. This layered approach allowed for ways to relate micro-level decisions, that is, in the classroom, to broader questions of ideology, inclusion and linguistic sustainability.

3.2. Research Site, Participants, and Data Collection

A public sector girls' degree college in Qasimabad, Hyderabad, Sindh, Pakistan was selected as the research site. The college is used by students who speak different languages with Urdu and English as the dominant institutional languages and Sindhi as an important cultural language which has not yet been pedagogically integrated into the college. Total number of participants were 42 language and humanities female students and 3 female teachers. The data collection took place over six weeks during the fall of 2025 and included about 11 hours of interactional data, audio-visual recordings, verbatim transcripts, field notes on seating and participation, instructional materials such as handouts, textbooks, and lesson plans.

3.3. Analytical Categories and Procedures

The CDA framework employed was divided into five main categories: (1) Language choice: investigating who speaks what language and the hierarchy of languages; (2) Participation structure: identifying distribution of speaking turns to reveal inclusion and exclusion; (3) Code-switching: examining how languages alternate to understand negotiation of identities and institutional preferences; (4) Teacher authority: analyzing the control of discourse flow to indicate distribution of power; and (5) Silence: examining the absence or restriction of student voice as a marker of marginalisation. Data analysis comprised systematic re-viewing and re-reading of recordings and transcripts, and open coding of language and interactional features. Each of these features was sequentially axial-coded into four major categories: dominance, exclusion, participation, and language value. Findings were ensured by triangulation between recordings, transcripts and field notes.

3.4. Discourse Pattern Findings

Classroom interactions during all six sessions were extremely teacher centered and structured, and students had limited opportunities to interact with each other. Most of teacher questioning was closed questioning that did not allow for elaborative thinking. The answers given by the students were in a very small scope and limited the discursive power of learners. Feedback was evaluative and corrective in nature and reinforced hierarchical authority relationships. Participatory equity was still restricted as the turn-taking system was very much teacher-led. In particular, heavy code switching to Urdu/English was a sign of dominance of the institutional language at the expense of Sindhi. A representative exchange is when a student was hesitant to respond to a teacher's request for an English translation, the teacher provided evaluative

feedback on pronunciation standards and not content knowledge. The teacher then, switched to Urdu for further explanation without extending an invitation to use Sindhi so that Sindhi remained outside of the formal academic explanation, thus reinforcing the hierarchy. Within a CDA framework, this hierarchy is "naturalized" by the implementation of regular corrective practices and becomes a regular part of classroom procedures, rather than an institutional decision.

3.5. Participation Inequality and Linguistic Capital

There were marked disparities in speaking time throughout sessions. Confident students in Urdu or English were significantly more likely to be 'active respondents' in class discussions. On the other hand, Sindhi-dominant learners remained in the periphery status all the time. In one illustrative case, a student responded only in Urdu/English and had pointed out that he/she understood in Sindhi. This silence does not indicate disengagement or a lack of understanding on the part of students, but rather exclusion through the language of the school in which the student could express understanding, and this language was not recognized as suitable for legitimate academic work. This is consistent with the idea of 'linguistic capital' (Bourdieu 1991) in which a learner's language resources become a source of their competence as an institutional participant when they match the institutional values.

3.6. Functional Differentiation of Language Use

It emerged that there was a clear functional hierarchy in the way language was used from session to session. English was used for anything that required a high level of informational density and academic formality. The use of Urdu was for instruction, explanation and assessment. Sindhi, on the other hand, was limited to informal peer clarification and supportive roles. The teachers repeatedly asked students to explain in a proper manner in Urdu language whenever they gave explanations in Sindhi. The use of the word 'properly' here is fraught with ideology as it represents the quality of academic adequacy and specifically associates it with the use of Urdu. Sindhi was only recognized as an optional or auxiliary language and never as a language for conceptual explanations. This functional stratification directly attacks the sustainability of Sindhi language by limiting its use to lower academic status and social prestige.

3.7. Discursive Reproduction of Educational Inequality

These findings are in line with the theory of Critical Discourse Analysis in the process of reproduction of inequality in everyday discourse (Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 2001). In these classrooms, language hierarchies were not imposed from above but 'co-produced' locally by means of the moment to moment choices that were made in relation to the language of the response, the language of the question and in relation to the evaluation of the answer. What is important about these routinized practices is that they function as normalizing practices, that which starts out as institutional preference becomes 'naturalized' as appropriate academic practice. Importantly, classroom norms, unlike formal policy, are subject to rethinking and reconstruction, which indicates possible points of pedagogical intervention.

3.8. Implications for Linguistic Sustainability

An important discovery in this research is that classroom discourse is actually a language sustainability problem. The functional load of indigenous languages diminishes in a progressive manner when indigenous language is not included in academic explanation, and can lead to language shift. Younger generations get mixed messages that Sindhi is important to culture but not to academic studies. It is not enough that the symbols of the language are recognized: the language must be given ongoing and authentic opportunities for meaningful knowledge construction and academic use. Such legitimate spaces are essential for the flourishing of Sindhi's vitality, which, without them, is bound to be diminished despite its cultural significance.

3.9. Pedagogical Implications for Inclusive Multilingual Education

There are a number of implications for second language and foreign language teaching. First, the use of open-ended questions, planned translanguaging techniques can expand participation in the learning process while continuing to support academic English and Urdu development. Second, Sindhi based conceptual explanation can be beneficial for developing the target language learning along with the comprehension of the concepts. Third, in-service training for teachers should directly relate to the ideologic aspects of language choice, so that teachers can learn how to differentiate between providing academic mobility and inadvertently denigrating students' linguistic resources. Fourth, pedagogical practices and assessment procedures need to be redesigned to meet the needs of multilingual proficiency, especially where regional languages play an integral role in student identity and understanding.

4. Conclusion

In this article, a critical discourse analysis of the classroom discourse in educational contexts in Sindhi has been examined with respect to language hierarchy, participation, and linguistic sustainability. The study of six classroom sessions shows that Urdu and English are given a formal status, whereas Sindhi is playing a marginal role leading to the systematic marginalization of Sindhi dominant learners. The study suggests that classroom discourse can be conceptualized as a socio-linguistic ecosystem—the local place where power, participation, identity and language vitality are negotiated on an ongoing basis. Generally, this study makes a contribution to the field of language teaching and multilingual education studies by showing that the viability of indigenous languages is not only a matter of macro-level policies, but also of micro-level interactional practices. If Sindhi is to be a useful academic tool, it needs to be in a proper place in the formal education discourse, which is not only as a means to assert cultural identity and peer support but as a means to construct academic knowledge. Discourse patterns in the classroom are not an institutional reality, but rather a flexible space for exploring and enacting more equitable multilingual pedagogies.

5. Recommendations

As a result of this investigation, some recommendations are suggested to practitioners and policymakers: Professional development for classroom teachers should be offered on the ideological aspects of language choice and the connection between interactional practices and language sustainability. It is important that teachers are made aware of the ways in which corrective feedback, turn taking patterns and code switching decisions either support or challenge language hierarchies through training. Translanguaging, open-ended questions, and explanation with the help of Sindhi language should be systematically applied as pedagogical strategies in language teaching. These strategies can help to increase engagement and understanding and preserve students' language identities. Procedures and criteria for assessment need to be reconceptualized to allow for and acknowledge multilingualism. Assessment should take on board the breadth of pupils' linguistic resources not just specific languages. Longitudinal designs should be used in future studies to investigate if structured pedagogical interventions, through multiple languages, lead to durable changes in classroom participation patterns, agency of students and status of Sindhi as an academic language. Comparative analyses of two or more settings of education (for instance, rural/urban,

coeducational/single-sex) would provide insights on the ways in which these factors affect the hierarchy of languages and sustainability.

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