The Role of Language in Shaping Power Relations in Educational Settings

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Abstract

In educational environments, language is essential not only as a teaching tool but also as a means of establishing, upholding, and occasionally contesting power dynamics. This article investigates how language use in educational settings affects participation, authority, control, and identity. The study employs a qualitative research design grounded in Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to uncover implicit power relations present in educational discourse. Data were gathered through non-participant observations and audio recordings of English classroom interactions at a public junior high school in Pematangsiantar, North Sumatra. The findings reveal that teacher talk significantly dominates classroom interaction, utilizing imperative forms, closed-ended questioning, and the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) sequence to maintain institutional authority. This dominance positions the teacher as the primary authority while limiting students' opportunities to initiate interaction or negotiate meaning. The study concludes that understanding linguistic power is vital for supporting more inclusive and equitable teaching methods that redistribute power more effectively.

Keywords: *Language; Power Relations; Critical Pedagogy.*

Abstrak: Dalam lingkungan pendidikan, bahasa sangat penting tidak hanya sebagai alat pengajaran tetapi juga sebagai sarana untuk membangun, mempertahankan, dan terkadang menggugat dinamika kekuasaan. Artikel ini menyelidiki bagaimana penggunaan bahasa dalam lingkungan pendidikan memengaruhi partisipasi, otoritas, kontrol, dan identitas. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif yang didasarkan pada model tiga dimensi Analisis Wacana Kritis (CDA) Fairclough untuk mengungkap relasi kekuasaan implisit dalam wacana pendidikan. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi non-partisipan dan rekaman audio interaksi kelas bahasa Inggris di sebuah SMP Negeri di Pematangsiantar, Sumatera Utara. Temuan mengungkapkan bahwa tuturan guru sangat mendominasi interaksi kelas, menggunakan bentuk imperatif, pola pertanyaan tertutup, dan urutan Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) untuk mempertahankan otoritas institusional. Dominasi ini memposisikan guru sebagai otoritas utama sekaligus membatasi kesempatan siswa untuk memulai interaksi atau menegosiasikan makna. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pemahaman tentang kekuasaan linguistik sangat penting untuk mendukung metode pengajaran yang lebih inklusif dan adil yang mampu mendistribusikan kekuasaan secara lebih efektif.

Kata Kunci: *Bahasa, Relasi Kekuasaan, Pedagogi Kritis*

INTRODUCTION

Education is frequently perceived as a neutral space for the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next. However, through the lens of critical sociolinguistics, the classroom is actually a social arena where power relations are constructed and negotiated. Language plays a central role in this domain, as it determines how authority is exercised and how individuals are positioned. Educational institutions operate within a structured hierarchy where teachers and students occupy positions that are inherently unequal (Altun 2023).

The use of language in the school environment often reveals deep power imbalances through systematically conducted discourse control. Who has the right to speak, whose voice is prioritized, and which linguistic forms are considered legitimate are reflections of authority. For instance, the use of formal academic language often provides advantages to certain groups while marginalizing other students. Thus, language becomes a powerful instrument that can either promote inclusivity or perpetuate social stratification (Luke 2018).

The enforcement of power in education also extends to subtle linguistic practices embedded in policy documents and teacher instructions. Although these communicative behaviors often appear natural, they have a significant impact on the formation of students' identities and learning experiences (Putri, Vianty, and Silvhiany 2021). Research consistently shows that teacher talk dominates interactions, especially in learning environments that remain conservative. This creates constraints for students to express their ideas freely in class (Holliday 2020).

One of the primary manifestations of this dominance is the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) sequence pattern commonly found in schools (Atmojo, Saleh, and Widhiyanto 2020). In this pattern, the teacher initiates interaction with a question, the student provides a brief answer, and the teacher concludes with an evaluation (Happy Cruzia Rini and Arina Haque 2025). Although the IRF pattern is considered instructionally efficient, this structure reinforces asymmetrical relations by positioning the teacher as the sole authority. Consequently, opportunities for students to engage in deep dialogue, think critically, and demonstrate agency become limited (Dalia and Putra 2024; Uswatun Hasanah, Neni Afrida Sari, and Rahmad Husein 2024).

Teacher authority is linguistically constructed through the use of imperative sentences, directive expressions, and strict evaluative feedback (Mullet 2018). These linguistic choices provide signals of institutional control that place the teacher as the primary decision-maker in the learning process. At the macro level, students proficient in the dominant instructional language tend to gain greater visibility. Conversely, students whose communication styles differ from institutional norms are often neglected in the classroom dynamics (Osher et al. 2020).

Although studies regarding language in education have been extensively conducted, there remains a research gap concerning how language shapes power ideologically. Most previous studies focus more on the effectiveness of teaching methods rather than uncovering the ideological dimensions hidden behind utterances. Few studies use critical discourse analysis to explore everyday language practices at the secondary school level. This indicates the need for further investigation into these power mechanisms (Hamman 2018).

This research aims to investigate how language shapes power relations in a public junior high school in Pematangsiantar. By using a critical sociolinguistic perspective, this study seeks to demonstrate how language simultaneously maintains and undermines hierarchies. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for educators who wish to create a more egalitarian learning environment. This article is expected to contribute to the development of a more inclusive and participatory pedagogy.

METHOD

This study utilizes a qualitative design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how language constructs power. A qualitative approach is essential for interpreting the ideological elements and interaction patterns embedded in classroom discourse. CDA serves as the analytical framework to reveal implicit power relations and ideological assumptions within the educational setting. This methodology ensures a deep exploration of how linguistic choices reinforce institutional authority in the classroom.

The research was conducted at a public junior high school in Pematangsiantar, North Sumatra, Indonesia. This site represents a typical Indonesian school where English is a compulsory subject and interaction is teacher-centered. The classroom serves as a strategic site for analyzing teacher talk due to frequent verbal interactions. Participants included one experienced English teacher and eighth-grade students who acted as interlocutors.

Data were derived from audio recordings and written transcripts of naturally occurring classroom interactions. The primary focus was teacher talk, including instructions, queries, and evaluative comments used to exercise control. Student responses provided secondary data to analyze interactional features like turn-taking and feedback. Non-participant observations and field notes were also used to capture the pedagogical context throughout the school year.

Analysis followed Fairclough's three-dimensional model, encompassing text, discursive practice, and social practice. Textual analysis examined word selection, grammatical structures, and modality to identify how authority is established. Discursive practice analysis focused on how teacher talk is produced and understood through questioning and feedback sequences.

Finally, social practice analysis interpreted these findings within the broader institutional and educational context of Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Linguistic Manifestations of Authority

The findings of this study reveal that teacher talk significantly dominates classroom interaction during English teaching and learning activities. The teacher frequently controls the flow of discourse through explanations, instructions, and evaluative comments. This dominance positions the teacher as the primary authority in the classroom and limits students' opportunities to initiate interaction. Linguistic analysis shows a high frequency of imperative forms and directive expressions used to manage student behavior. These forms are not merely pedagogical tools but function as mechanisms of control that reinforce rigid hierarchical structures (Joullié et al. 2021).

By utilizing these directives, the teacher positions themselves as the central decision-maker, leaving little room for student negotiation. This linguistic control is a manifestation of institutional authority that views the classroom as a site of compliance. The teacher regularly employs imperative forms to manage classroom activities and guide student behavior. Such language reinforces hierarchical relations, as students are expected to follow instructions with minimal resistance. This finding supports critical discourse perspectives that view classroom language as a means of maintaining power.

The dominance is further evidenced by the specific choice of vocabulary and modality that signals certainty and expertise. Such linguistic patterns create a communicative environment where the teacher's voice defines legitimate knowledge. In this context, students are socialized into a culture of compliance where following linguistic cues is equated with success. The use of language here serves to normalize the unequal distribution of power within the school. These practices reflect broader teacher-centered instructional norms in Indonesian junior high school education.

At the textual level, the teacher's use of modality indicates a high level of commitment to the truth-claims being presented. Grammatical structures used in the classroom predominantly feature the teacher as the active subject and students as passive objects (Siewierska 2024). This grammatical positioning strips the students of their communicative agency and reinforces their subordinate status. Modality choices often exclude the possibility of alternative interpretations, presenting knowledge as a fixed and indisputable entity. Consequently, the linguistic landscape of the classroom becomes a reflection of broader social hierarchies (Putri et al. 2021).

The teacher's instructional language is characterized by a "pedagogy of command" where every utterance serves a regulatory function. Even when asking questions, the linguistic structure often limits the range of acceptable student responses. Closed-ended questions predominantly require short and specific responses that check comprehension rather than critical thinking. This ensures that the teacher remains the main evaluator of knowledge and the controller of the interactional space. Such patterns prevent the emergence of a more democratic and participatory classroom environment.

The choice of vocabulary often emphasizes the teacher's role as the sole source of English language expertise. By using complex linguistic forms

without providing space for student clarification, the teacher asserts intellectual dominance. This creates a barrier for eighth-grade students who demonstrate varied levels of English proficiency. Students often find themselves marginalized when their linguistic practices do not align with the teacher's expectations. This linguistic inequality contributes to the reproduction of broader social hierarchies within the educational setting.

Furthermore, the teacher's use of directives extends beyond mere academic instruction to the regulation of physical movement and posture. This "micro-physics of power" is achieved through simple yet potent linguistic commands that demand immediate obedience. The cumulative effect of these linguistic choices is the naturalization of the teacher's absolute authority. Students internalize these power dynamics, viewing the asymmetrical relationship as an unquestionable reality of school life. This internalization is the ultimate success of the ideological function of teacher talk (Jaspers 2019).

The analysis also reveals that the teacher's evaluative comments act as a powerful gatekeeping mechanism. Positive feedback reinforces acceptable answers, while corrective feedback emphasizes accuracy and conformity to expected knowledge. This evaluative function strengthens the teacher's authoritative position and reduces opportunities for dialogic interaction. In this communicative regime, the teacher talk is not just about teaching English; it is about disciplining the student. These practices reflect the deeply embedded teacher-centered norms found in the Indonesian educational context.

The IRF Sequence and Agency Restriction

The data confirms the prevalence of the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) structure as the dominant interactional pattern in English lessons. The teacher typically initiates interaction through closed-ended questions that require brief, specific answers from students. This pattern ensures that the teacher remains the primary evaluator of all classroom contributions. Consequently, student participation is restricted to responding to teacher-led prompts rather than initiating independent inquiries. This structural rigidity characterizes the pedagogical landscape of the observed school year (Dalia and Putra 2024).

The prevalence of closed-ended questioning serves a dual purpose: maintaining instructional pace and asserting discursive control. By asking questions with singular "correct" answers, the teacher eliminates the possibility of unpredictable student contributions. This interactional cycle reinforces the teacher's role as the sole repository of legitimate knowledge. Students are positioned as respondents whose linguistic output is tightly monitored and bounded. Such a structure effectively prevents the classroom from becoming a space for genuine communicative exchange.

The restriction of agency through the IRF cycle limits the development of critical thinking and extended dialogue among eighth-grade students. Because the teacher controls the turn-taking process, students rarely have the opportunity to challenge ideas or negotiate meaning. This interactional rigidity reflects a broader teacher-centered instructional norm prevalent in Indonesian education. The repetitive nature of this cycle reinforces the students' role as passive recipients of information. This passivity is not a student trait but a product of linguistic positioning.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, the IRF sequence is far from being a neutral pedagogical tool. It functions as a mechanism that normalizes asymmetrical power relations by presenting teacher authority as natural. Every "Initiation" by the teacher sets the boundaries of what is worth discussing. Every "Response" from the student is a performance of compliance within those boundaries. Finally, every "Feedback" serves as the final seal of institutional approval or correction (Uswatun Hasanah et al. 2024).

The analysis shows that students' responses are examined primarily to support the teacher's pre-determined lesson trajectory. This means that even when students speak, their voices are often instrumentalized to reach a specific instructional goal. There is a noticeable absence of student-initiated questions or spontaneous peer-to-peer dialogue. This lack of initiation suggests that students have internalized their role as subordinates within the discursive hierarchy. The classroom thus becomes a site where power is exercised through the very structure of conversation.

This interactional symmetry—where the teacher always leads and the student always follows—limits linguistic growth. In an EFL context, students need opportunities to produce "pushed output" and negotiate meaning to achieve proficiency. However, the IRF structure prioritizes accuracy and conformity over communicative fluency and creative expression. By limiting students to short, specific responses, the teacher inadvertently hinders their linguistic and cognitive development. The focus remains on the reproduction of knowledge rather than its critical co-construction.

The institutional discourse in Pematangsiantar reflects a wider cultural and educational prioritization of order over agency. Teachers are often under pressure to cover the curriculum, leading them to adopt more controlling communicative styles. This systemic pressure manifests in the classroom as a series of tightly controlled verbal exchanges. While efficient for time management, it sacrifices the students' opportunity to develop a sense of agency. Language, in this sense, becomes a cage rather than a bridge to empowerment.

Ultimately, the IRF sequence serves as a daily ritual that reinforces the teacher's institutional identity as the expert. By consistently occupying the "Initiator" and "Evaluator" slots, the teacher maintains a monopoly over the classroom discourse. Students, restricted to the "Respondent" slot, find it difficult to transition into more active or critical roles. This linguistic inequality contributes to the long-term reproduction of social hierarchies within the educational system. Understanding this dynamic is essential for any attempt to redistribute power in the classroom

Evaluative Feedback as a Mechanism of Disciplinary Power

Feedback in the observed classroom functions primarily as a tool for evaluation and reinforcement of accuracy. Positive feedback is used to validate conformity to expected knowledge, while corrective feedback emphasizes linguistic and behavioral accuracy. Although essential for learning, the dominant evaluative function of feedback further strengthens the teacher's authoritative position. This practice restricts the potential for more dialogic and inclusive communicative exchanges. The teacher remains the main evaluator of knowledge through these interactions (Esterhazy 2018).

Through evaluative comments, the teacher frequently provides explicit approval or correction of student responses. This dominance positioned the teacher as the primary authority in the classroom. Positive feedback reinforced acceptable answers, ensuring students remained within the boundaries of "legitimate" knowledge. Corrective feedback, meanwhile, focused heavily on accuracy and conformity to expected standards. This reinforces hierarchical relations as students are expected to follow specific linguistic paths. The feedback loop thus acts as a disciplinary gatekeeper.

From a critical perspective, this evaluative feedback acts as a form of disciplinary power that shapes student identities. Students learn to align their responses with the teacher's expectations to avoid correction or marginalization. This constant evaluation creates a power dynamic where communicative power is unevenly distributed. The teacher's role as the sole evaluator of truth limits the students' willingness to express alternative ideas. In this environment, the "correct" answer is valued over the "critical" inquiry. This reinforces the teacher's institutional role as the primary decision-maker (Carless et al. 2023).

The teacher's use of feedback also serves to regulate participation and control interaction. By defining what constitutes a "good" response, the teacher sets the standards for academic competence. Students who fail to meet these standards may experience marginalization within the classroom. This linguistic inequality contributes to the reproduction of broader social hierarchies. Even when feedback is intended to be helpful, its authoritative delivery signals control. The classroom becomes a site where identities are disciplined through talk.

Furthermore, the prevalence of evaluative feedback reflects common instructional practices in Indonesian junior high schools. Efficiency and curriculum coverage are often prioritized over dialogic interaction in these settings. This context encourages teachers to use feedback as a quick corrective tool rather than a bridge for discussion. Consequently, students find themselves in an environment that prizes conformity over creativity. The teacher's authoritative position is strengthened by this constant evaluative presence. This practice restricts opportunities for students to initiate their own inquiries (Dawson, Carless, and Lee 2021).

The analysis of teacher talk in Pematangsiantar shows that feedback is rarely used to open new dialogue. Instead, it usually terminates the exchange, reinforcing the teacher's control over the discourse. This termination prevents students from negotiating meaning or exploring alternative linguistic forms. When the teacher provides the final evaluation, the student's voice is effectively silenced until the next prompt. This interactional structure limits opportunities for extended dialogue and student agency. It is a manifestation of the teacher-centered norms found in the school (Rees et al. 2020).

By focusing primarily on accuracy, the teacher's feedback limits the communicative power of eighth-grade students. Students demonstrate varied levels of proficiency, yet the feedback often demands immediate conformity to a single standard. This creates a high-stakes environment where the fear of being "wrong" outweighs the desire to participate. As a result, students may experience limited autonomy in expressing their original ideas. The feedback mechanism thus functions as a subtle form of institutional surveillance. It

ensures that students stay aligned with the prescribed curriculum and authority (Quinlan and Pitt 2025).

Ultimately, the evaluative function of teacher talk reinforces the asymmetrical power structures inherent in education. While feedback is a necessary pedagogical tool, its current use in the classroom serves a disciplinary purpose. It positions students as passive recipients who must be corrected rather than active participants who can lead. Adopting more inclusive and dialogic feedback practices could help redistribute this power. This would allow for a more balanced distribution of communicative power in the classroom. Understanding these dynamics is the first step toward promoting student empowerment.

Socio-Institutional Implications of Linguistic Hegemony

The linguistic patterns observed in Pematangsiantar reflect the broader socio-institutional structures of the Indonesian education system. The prioritization of curriculum coverage and efficiency often necessitates a more controlled and teacher-centered discourse. In this context, teacher talk serves as the primary discourse used to exercise control and authority. This systemic pressure manifests as a form of linguistic hegemony where the teacher's voice is the only one empowered to define knowledge. Such patterns are not isolated incidents but represent a typical Indonesian junior high school environment.

This linguistic hegemony can lead to the marginalization of students whose communication styles differ from the institutional norm. Language thus serves as a gatekeeper that maintains existing social and institutional hierarchies. Students from diverse linguistic or cultural backgrounds may find themselves at a disadvantage when formal academic language is the only accepted form. This process of marginalization occurs subtly through daily interactions and feedback sequences. By rewarding conformity, the system inadvertently silences alternative perspectives and diverse voices.

The study makes the case that understanding linguistic power is essential for supporting more inclusive and equitable teaching methods. Educational institutions operate within structured hierarchies where teachers, administrators, and students occupy unequal positions. These power relations are often realized through classroom interaction, academic texts, and institutional regulations. Without a critical understanding of these dynamics, teachers may unintentionally reproduce broader social inequalities. Language, therefore, is a potent tool that can either promote inclusiveness or perpetuate inequality.

The prevalence of directive language and closed-ended questioning reflects a teacher-centered approach that limits student agency. From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, such interactional patterns normalize hierarchical relations as natural and unquestionable. This finding aligns with previous studies that argue classroom discourse often reproduces institutional power structures. Students are positioned as passive participants in the learning process, which restricts their role as active knowledge-creators. This positioning has long-term effects on how students perceive their own authority and intellectual autonomy.

To move toward a more equitable environment, there is a need for a shift toward dialogic and inclusive language practices. By adopting open-ended questioning and encouraging student-led discourse, teachers can redistribute

power more effectively. This transformation requires a conscious effort to recognize the ideological dimensions of everyday classroom talk. Teachers must move beyond viewing language as a neutral tool for instruction. Instead, they must see it as a social practice that shapes the social and academic positioning of students.

The findings also suggest that power relations in the classroom are not fixed or immutable. By adopting inclusive language, teachers can create opportunities for greater student participation and a more balanced distribution of power. This involves a shift from being the sole evaluator of truth to being a facilitator of dialogue. Such a change would allow students to express alternative or creative ideas without fear of immediate correction. Ultimately, creating a reflective learning space requires a fundamental re-evaluation of institutional authority.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides the necessary framework for examining the relationship between language, power, and ideology in education. According to Fairclough, language use is closely connected to power relations and ideological processes that operate implicitly. By applying this model, researchers and educators can uncover the hidden mechanisms that control classroom life. This study contributes to that goal by critically analyzing the role of language as a power mechanism in a specific local context. It highlights the need for a more democratic approach to classroom communication.

In conclusion, understanding linguistic power is the first step toward creating a truly participatory and reflective learning space. The findings from Pematangsiantar underscore the importance of recognizing the ideological connotations embedded in common educational practices. By changing how they speak, teachers can change how students learn and how they view their place in the world. This shift is essential for fostering a generation of critical thinkers who can navigate and challenge power structures. Language must be transformed from a tool of control into a bridge for empowerment.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that language in the classroom of a public junior high school in Pematangsiantar is a primary instrument for maintaining institutional authority. The dominance of teacher talk, specifically through imperative forms and the IRF sequence, restricts student agency and reinforces a hierarchical structure. These linguistic patterns are not neutral but are ideologically driven to ensure compliance and instructional efficiency. Thus, the classroom becomes a space where power is continuously negotiated and exercised through discourse.

The findings have significant theoretical implications for the field of sociolinguistics and critical pedagogy. This research reinforces the idea that micro-linguistic choices in the classroom reflect macro-social structures and power dynamics. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study uncovers how institutional authority is naturalized through everyday verbal interactions. Theoretically, it suggests that language does not only transmit

knowledge but also actively shapes the social and academic identity of the students.

Practically, these results imply an urgent need for professional development that focuses on dialogic and inclusive communication. Teachers must be trained to recognize the ideological impact of their speech and to transition from authoritative to facilitative roles. Adopting open-ended questioning and inclusive feedback can redistribute communicative power and encourage student-led discourse. Such a shift is essential for creating a more democratic and participatory learning environment that values student voices.

Ultimately, this research serves as a foundation for future studies to explore more diverse educational contexts. While this study focuses on a specific school in Pematangsiantar, the patterns of linguistic hegemony identified may be prevalent in other teacher-centered settings. Further investigation into student-led resistance or negotiation of power through language would provide a more holistic view of these dynamics. Recognizing linguistic power is the first step toward a more equitable and reflective educational system.

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