

Power Relations in English Language Classrooms: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Teacher–Student Interaction in Pakistani BS English Programs

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Abstract

Teacher–student interaction is a central component of English language teaching because it influences learning, participation, classroom relationships, and knowledge construction. The language used by teachers and students not only facilitates communication but also reflects authority, identity, and power within the classroom. This study examines power relations in English language classrooms through a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of teacher–student interaction in BS English programs at Islamabad Model Postgraduate Colleges, Islamabad. The research adopts a qualitative design and is guided by Fairclough's (1995) Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis together with Foucault's (1977, 1980) theory of power. Data are collected through classroom observations, audio-recorded classroom interactions, and semi-structured interviews with teachers and students. The analysis focuses on questioning strategies, lexical choices, directives, modality, turn-taking, feedback, and classroom participation to understand how power is constructed and negotiated during classroom communication. The findings indicate that teachers generally maintain institutional authority through classroom management and instructional discourse, while students actively negotiate participation by asking questions, expressing opinions, and engaging in collaborative discussions. The study concludes that effective English language classrooms require a balance between teacher authority and learner participation. Such a balance creates an inclusive learning environment that enhances students' communicative competence, confidence, critical thinking, and academic engagement. The findings contribute to discourse studies and English language teaching by providing practical implications for teachers, curriculum developers, and educational policymakers in Pakistan.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, teacher–student interaction, classroom discourse, power relations, English language teaching, BS English, Pakistan, Fairclough, Foucault.*

1. Introduction

Language is one of the most important tools through which people communicate, share knowledge, and build social relationships. In educational settings, language performs an even broader function because it not only transfers information but also organizes classroom activities, shapes learning experiences, and constructs relationships between teachers and students. Every classroom interaction reflects social roles, institutional expectations, and patterns of authority. Teachers use language to explain concepts, ask questions, provide feedback, manage classroom behavior, and assess students' understanding, whereas students use language to respond, seek clarification, express opinions, and participate in academic discussions. Therefore, classroom discourse is not simply a means of communication but also a reflection of the power relationships that exist within educational institutions (Fairclough, 1995).

Power relations in classrooms have attracted considerable attention in educational linguistics because they influence learners' participation, confidence, motivation, and opportunities to construct knowledge. Traditional teacher-centered classrooms often position teachers as the primary holders of knowledge while students assume relatively passive roles. However, modern language teaching emphasizes learner-centered approaches in which teachers facilitate interaction and students actively participate in learning through discussion, collaboration, and critical thinking (Walsh, 2011). Consequently, power in classroom discourse is increasingly viewed as dynamic, negotiated, and socially constructed rather than fixed or hierarchical.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides an effective framework for examining how language constructs institutional authority and social relationships. Fairclough (1995) argues that discourse reflects broader social structures while simultaneously shaping them. Similarly, Foucault (1977, 1980) explains that power is exercised through everyday practices and communication rather than existing solely in formal institutional positions. These perspectives suggest that classroom interaction is an important site where authority, identity, participation, and resistance are continually negotiated through language.

In Pakistan, English functions as an official language and an important medium of instruction in higher education. Students enrolled in BS English programs are expected to develop advanced communication skills, critical thinking, and academic competence through active classroom participation. Nevertheless, classroom interaction often remains teacher-dominated, limiting opportunities for students to contribute meaningfully. Understanding how power relations are constructed through discourse is therefore essential for improving English language teaching practices. This study investigates teacher–student interaction in BS English classrooms at Islamabad Model Postgraduate Colleges to explore how linguistic choices shape classroom authority, participation, and collaborative learning.

1.1 Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How are power relations constructed through teacher–student interaction in BS English classrooms at Islamabad Model Postgraduate Colleges?
2. Which discourse features, including questioning strategies, lexical choices, directives, modality, feedback, and turn-taking, contribute to the construction and negotiation of classroom power?
3. How does classroom discourse influence students' participation, engagement, and collaborative learning in Pakistani BS English programs?

1.2 Significance of the Study

The present study contributes to English language teaching and applied linguistics by examining how classroom discourse constructs power relations within Pakistani higher education. While considerable international research has explored teacher–student interaction, relatively limited attention has been given to Critical Discourse Analysis of English language classrooms in Pakistan. The findings will provide valuable insights into how teachers' linguistic choices influence classroom participation, learner confidence, and communicative competence. The study is expected to assist English language teachers in adopting more learner-centered and interaction-oriented teaching practices. It will also support curriculum developers by highlighting the importance of classroom dialogue, collaborative learning, and effective communication in English language education. Furthermore, the research contributes to the application of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis and Foucault's theory of power in educational discourse, thereby enriching discourse studies within the Pakistani context. Ultimately, the study aims to promote classroom environments that encourage meaningful interaction, shared knowledge construction, and effective English language learning.

2. Literature Review

Power relations in educational settings have become an important area of research in applied linguistics, discourse studies, and language education. Researchers argue that classroom interaction is not limited to the transmission of knowledge; instead, it is a social process through which authority, participation, identity, and learning are continuously negotiated. In English language classrooms, teachers and students use language to organize lessons, ask questions, provide feedback, express opinions, and construct academic knowledge. These interactional practices reveal how power operates within the classroom and influences students' learning experiences. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has therefore become an important analytical

approach for examining how linguistic choices reproduce or challenge institutional authority in educational contexts (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

The concept of classroom discourse has been widely discussed by discourse analysts and educational researchers. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) were among the first scholars to examine classroom interaction systematically. Their Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) model demonstrated that classroom communication generally follows a structured pattern in which teachers initiate questions, students provide responses, and teachers evaluate those responses. Although this model explains the organizational structure of classroom interaction, later researchers argued that it reflects traditional teacher-centered classrooms where teachers control most communication. Walsh (2011) expanded this perspective by emphasizing classroom interactional competence, suggesting that effective language learning occurs when teachers create opportunities for meaningful dialogue rather than controlling every aspect of classroom communication. This shift reflects contemporary educational theories that encourage collaborative learning and student participation.

Critical Discourse Analysis provides the theoretical foundation for examining classroom power because it views language as a social practice closely connected with ideology, authority, and institutional structures. Fairclough (1995) argues that discourse simultaneously reflects and shapes society through three interconnected dimensions: textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. At the textual level, researchers examine vocabulary, grammar, modality, and interactional patterns. At the discursive level, they investigate how discourse is produced and interpreted, while the social level explores the relationship between language and broader social institutions. Within educational settings, this framework enables researchers to understand how teachers' linguistic choices influence classroom participation, authority, and knowledge construction. Consequently, CDA has become one of the most influential approaches for investigating educational discourse.

The concept of power proposed by Foucault (1977, 1980) complements Critical Discourse Analysis by explaining that power is not possessed exclusively by individuals but circulates through everyday social interactions. According to Foucault, institutions such as schools exercise power through discourse, rules, observation, assessment, and routine communication. In classrooms, teachers possess institutional authority because they organize lessons, evaluate students, and manage classroom activities. However, power remains dynamic because students also negotiate authority through questioning, discussion, cooperation, and resistance. This understanding challenges traditional assumptions that teachers alone control classroom interaction. Instead, power emerges through continuous negotiation between participants during communication. Researchers have increasingly investigated teacher–student interaction to understand how classroom discourse influences learning. Mercer (2000) argues that classroom talk plays a fundamental role in cognitive development because learners construct knowledge

collaboratively through dialogue. Similarly, Alexander (2018) introduced the concept of dialogic teaching, emphasizing that effective classrooms encourage discussion, reasoning, and collaborative inquiry rather than one-way instruction. According to Alexander, meaningful dialogue enables students to develop critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and communicative competence. These findings suggest that classroom authority should facilitate learning instead of restricting participation.

Questioning strategies represent one of the most frequently studied aspects of classroom discourse because they influence both teacher authority and student participation. Traditional classrooms commonly employ display questions, where teachers already know the correct answer and use questions primarily to assess students' knowledge (Walsh, 2011). Although such questions help evaluate learning, they often restrict opportunities for extended discussion. In contrast, referential questions encourage learners to express opinions, explain ideas, and participate actively in classroom interaction. Research indicates that classrooms characterized by open-ended questioning promote greater learner engagement, confidence, and communicative competence (Alexander, 2018). Therefore, questioning strategies play an important role in shaping classroom power relations.

Teacher feedback also contributes significantly to classroom discourse and the negotiation of authority. Hattie and Timperley (2007) argue that effective feedback enhances learning by helping students identify strengths, recognize weaknesses, and improve future performance. Positive evaluative expressions encourage participation and strengthen learner confidence, whereas excessively negative feedback may reduce motivation and increase communication anxiety. Walsh (2011) similarly suggests that constructive feedback promotes collaborative learning because students perceive teachers as facilitators rather than authoritarian figures. These findings indicate that feedback functions as both an instructional strategy and a discourse practice that shapes classroom relationships.

Lexical choices and modality further influence how authority is communicated during classroom interaction. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) explain that language choices reflect interpersonal relationships between speakers. Teachers frequently use modal verbs such as *must*, *should*, and *need to* when giving instructions or establishing classroom rules, thereby expressing obligation and authority. Conversely, expressions such as *perhaps*, *let us discuss*, and *what do you think* reduce hierarchical distance and invite collaborative participation. Such linguistic choices demonstrate that classroom authority is constructed not only through institutional position but also through discourse itself.

Turn-taking has also received considerable attention in classroom discourse research. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) observed that teachers generally control speaking opportunities by selecting speakers, allocating turns, and determining discussion topics. However, more recent

studies indicate that collaborative classroom activities distribute speaking opportunities more equally among participants (Seedhouse, 2004; Walsh, 2011). Student-centered teaching encourages learners to ask questions, challenge ideas respectfully, and participate in peer discussions. Consequently, classroom interaction becomes more democratic, allowing students to share responsibility for knowledge construction.

Within the Pakistani educational context, English functions as an official language and the principal medium of instruction in higher education. Nevertheless, several studies report that English language classrooms remain predominantly teacher-centered, limiting students' opportunities for meaningful interaction (Rahman, 2020; Shamim, 2011). Teachers often emphasize examination preparation, grammatical accuracy, and content coverage, leaving limited time for collaborative discussion and critical inquiry. Such instructional practices may reduce students' confidence in expressing opinions and participating actively in classroom communication. Recent educational reforms, however, increasingly encourage communicative language teaching, learner autonomy, and interactive pedagogy.

Although previous international research has extensively examined classroom discourse, relatively few studies have applied Critical Discourse Analysis to investigate teacher–student interaction within Pakistani BS English programs. Existing studies primarily focus on language teaching methods, classroom management, or communicative competence rather than examining how discourse constructs institutional authority and learner participation. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to the linguistic features—including lexical choices, questioning strategies, directives, modality, feedback, and turn-taking—that shape power relations in higher education classrooms. This gap highlights the need for further research that explores classroom interaction through Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework within Pakistani universities.

The present study addresses this gap by examining naturally occurring teacher–student interaction in BS English classrooms at Islamabad Model Postgraduate Colleges. Using Fairclough's (1995) Three-Dimensional Model together with Foucault's theory of power (1977, 1980), the study investigates how classroom discourse constructs authority, participation, and collaborative learning. Unlike earlier studies that emphasize teaching methods alone, this research focuses on the linguistic mechanisms through which classroom relationships are established and negotiated. The findings are expected to contribute to discourse studies, applied linguistics, and English language education by providing practical recommendations for improving classroom communication and promoting learner-centered teaching practices in Pakistani higher education.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present study adopts a qualitative research design using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate power relations in teacher–student interaction within English language classrooms. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study aims to explore how language constructs authority, participation, and classroom relationships rather than measuring variables statistically. Critical Discourse Analysis enables the researcher to examine linguistic features alongside their social and institutional meanings (Fairclough, 1995). The study focuses on naturally occurring classroom interaction to understand how teachers and students negotiate power through everyday communication. This approach provides a detailed understanding of classroom discourse within the context of Pakistani higher education.

3.2 Research Setting

The research was conducted at **Islamabad Model Postgraduate Colleges for Boys and Girls, Islamabad**, where BS English programs are offered. These colleges were selected because English serves as the primary medium of instruction for language and literature courses. Students come from diverse linguistic backgrounds, including Urdu, Punjabi, Pashto, Hindko, and other regional languages, creating a multilingual learning environment suitable for discourse analysis. Classroom interaction in these institutions provides an appropriate context for examining how language reflects institutional authority, participation, and collaborative learning.

3.3 Participants

The participants consisted of **six English language teachers** and **thirty BS English students** selected from different semesters through purposive sampling. Teachers were selected because of their active involvement in language teaching, while students represented different academic levels to ensure diverse interactional experiences. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection.

3.4 Data Collection

The study employed three methods of data collection to ensure credibility through triangulation. First, classroom observations were conducted to examine naturally occurring teacher–student interaction. Second, classroom discussions and lectures were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both teachers and students to understand their perceptions regarding classroom communication, participation, and authority. These multiple sources provided comprehensive qualitative data for analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were transcribed and analyzed using Fairclough's (1995) Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis. The analysis focused on lexical choices, questioning strategies, directives, modality, feedback, politeness strategies, and turn-taking patterns. These discourse features were interpreted in relation to classroom practices and broader institutional power structures. The findings were then compared with previous studies to identify similarities, differences, and emerging themes regarding classroom power relations.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and signed informed consent forms before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by replacing participants' names with pseudonyms. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. All collected data were used solely for academic purposes.

3.7 Theoretical Framework

The present study is primarily guided by Norman Fairclough's (1995) Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Fairclough argues that language is a form of social practice through which individuals construct, maintain, and negotiate power relationships. His framework consists of three interconnected dimensions: textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. Textual analysis examines vocabulary, grammar, modality, and interactional features within classroom communication. Discursive practice investigates how classroom discourse is produced and interpreted by teachers and students, while social practice explains how classroom interaction reflects broader institutional and educational structures. This model enables the researcher to investigate how everyday classroom language contributes to the construction of authority and participation.

The study is further supported by Michel Foucault's Theory of Power (1977, 1980), which views power as a dynamic social process rather than a possession held by individuals. According to Foucault, power operates through discourse, institutional practices, and everyday interactions. In educational institutions, teachers exercise authority through classroom management, questioning, assessment, and instructional language. However, students are not passive recipients of power; they negotiate authority by asking questions, expressing opinions, seeking clarification, and participating in classroom discussions. Foucault's perspective helps explain how classroom discourse becomes a site where authority is continuously produced, challenged, and reconstructed through communication.

The integration of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis with Foucault's theory provides a comprehensive framework for examining teacher–student interaction in Pakistani BS English classrooms. Fairclough's model offers systematic linguistic tools for analyzing classroom discourse, whereas Foucault's theory explains the broader social and institutional significance of those linguistic choices. Together, these theories enable the researcher to examine how lexical choices, directives, questioning strategies, modality, feedback, and turn-taking construct classroom power relations while influencing learner participation, confidence, and collaborative learning.

Figure 3.1. Three-Dimensional Theoretical Framework

RESEARCH OUTCOMES

Construction of Power Relations

Classroom Participation

Student Engagement

Learner Autonomy

Collaborative Learning



CLASSROOM DISCOURSE FEATURES

Lexical Choices

Questioning Strategies

Directives

Turn-taking

Feedback

Modality

Politeness Strategies



THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

- a. Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (1995): Text, Discursive Practice, Social Practice
- b. Foucault's Theory of Power (1977, 1980): Power through Discourse, Institutional Authority, Negotiated Power

Source: Adapted from Fairclough (1995) and Foucault (1977, 1980).

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

The classroom observations and interview data reveal that teacher–student interaction in BS English classrooms is characterized by a continuous negotiation of authority and participation. Although teachers possess institutional authority, students actively contribute to classroom communication through questions, discussions, presentations, and collaborative activities. The analysis identified six major themes that explain how power relations are constructed through discourse.

4.1 Teacher Authority through Classroom Discourse

The findings indicate that teachers establish classroom authority primarily through instructional language, directives, and organizational discourse. Expressions such as "Please open your books," "Focus on this concept," "Listen carefully," and "Complete this activity first" were frequently observed during classroom interaction. These directives enabled teachers to organize lessons efficiently while maintaining classroom discipline. Fairclough (1995) argues that institutional authority is often communicated through linguistic structures that regulate social interaction. Similarly, Foucault (1977) explains that educational institutions exercise power through routine communicative practices rather than physical control. The findings suggest that teachers' authority is generally accepted by students because it facilitates classroom organization and learning rather than creating unnecessary domination.

However, teacher authority was not entirely authoritarian. Classroom observations showed that many teachers softened directives by using polite expressions such as "Let's discuss this together," "Would anyone like to explain?" and "Can someone share another opinion?" Such language reduced hierarchical distance and encouraged students to participate actively. These findings support Walsh (2011), who argues that interactional competence enables teachers to balance authority with learner engagement.

4.2 Questioning Strategies and Power Negotiation

Questioning emerged as one of the most significant discourse strategies for constructing classroom power. Teachers regularly used both display questions and referential questions. Display questions, such as "What is the definition of discourse?", primarily assessed students' knowledge, whereas referential questions, including "Why do you think the writer uses this expression?", encouraged critical thinking and extended discussion.

The observations indicate that referential questions generated greater student participation because they allowed multiple acceptable responses. Students responded confidently when they were invited to express opinions rather than recall memorized information. Alexander (2018) argues that dialogic questioning transforms classrooms into collaborative learning environments where knowledge is jointly constructed. Similarly, Walsh (2011) maintains that open-ended questions reduce teacher dominance and promote learner autonomy. The findings therefore demonstrate that questioning strategies significantly influence the distribution of classroom power.

4.3 Lexical Choices and Classroom Relationships

Teachers' lexical choices played a central role in shaping classroom interaction. The analysis showed that teachers frequently used inclusive expressions such as "we," "our discussion," "let us examine," and "together we can understand." These lexical choices created a collaborative learning atmosphere by emphasizing shared responsibility rather than teacher-centered instruction.

In contrast, authoritative expressions such as "You must remember," "This is compulsory," and "You should write this exactly" reflected institutional authority and academic expectations. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) explain that interpersonal language choices communicate social relationships between speakers. The findings suggest that teachers strategically alternated between authoritative and collaborative language depending on instructional objectives. This flexibility contributed to maintaining discipline while encouraging meaningful interaction.

4.4 Turn-Taking and Student Participation

Turn-taking patterns revealed important aspects of classroom power. Teachers generally initiated discussions and allocated speaking turns, reflecting their institutional role. Nevertheless, students increasingly participated through voluntary responses, peer discussions, and classroom presentations. Several classroom sessions included group activities in which students interacted freely with one another before sharing their conclusions with the class.

These collaborative activities reduced teacher dominance and encouraged equal participation among students. Mercer (2000) argues that collaborative dialogue promotes deeper understanding because learners construct knowledge collectively. Similarly, Seedhouse (2004) notes that learner-centered interaction redistributes classroom authority by increasing students' opportunities to contribute. The findings therefore indicate that effective classroom interaction involves shared responsibility for communication rather than exclusive teacher control.

4.5 Feedback and Learner Confidence

Teacher feedback emerged as another important mechanism through which classroom power was exercised. Positive comments such as "Excellent observation," "Very good explanation," and "That's an interesting interpretation" encouraged students to participate confidently. Constructive feedback motivated learners to improve without creating communication anxiety.

Conversely, corrective feedback was generally provided politely and accompanied by explanations rather than criticism. Teachers frequently reformulated students' responses instead of directly rejecting them. Hattie and Timperley (2007) argue that effective feedback enhances learning because it guides improvement while maintaining learner motivation. The findings indicate that supportive feedback transforms teacher authority into educational guidance, strengthening classroom relationships and promoting active participation.

4.6 Discussion

The overall findings demonstrate that power relations in BS English classrooms are dynamic rather than fixed. Although teachers possess institutional authority, classroom discourse increasingly reflects collaborative learning where students negotiate participation through discussion, questioning, presentations, and peer interaction. Fairclough's (1995) model explains that discourse simultaneously reflects institutional structures and creates opportunities for social change. Similarly, Foucault's (1980) theory suggests that power continuously circulates through interaction rather than remaining exclusively with teachers.

Compared with earlier teacher-centered classroom models described by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), the observed classrooms displayed greater interaction and learner engagement. Nevertheless, teachers remained responsible for organizing activities, evaluating responses, and maintaining academic standards. This balance between authority and participation appears particularly effective for English language learning because it supports communicative competence while preserving instructional organization. The findings are also consistent with Alexander's (2018) concept of dialogic teaching and Walsh's (2011) theory of classroom interactional competence, both of which emphasize meaningful dialogue as the foundation of effective language education. Students reported feeling more confident when teachers encouraged discussion, respected diverse opinions, and provided constructive feedback. These

interactional practices created an inclusive classroom environment where authority functioned as educational leadership rather than domination. Consequently, the study demonstrates that effective English language classrooms benefit from discourse practices that combine institutional guidance with collaborative participation, enabling students to develop both linguistic competence and critical thinking skills.

5. Conclusion

The present study examined power relations in English language classrooms through a Critical Discourse Analysis of teacher–student interaction in the BS English programs at Islamabad Model Postgraduate Colleges. The findings demonstrate that classroom discourse is not merely a medium for delivering academic content but also a social practice through which authority, participation, and knowledge are continuously constructed and negotiated. Teachers exercised institutional authority through questioning strategies, directives, lexical choices, feedback, and classroom management, while students actively negotiated their roles by asking questions, expressing opinions, participating in discussions, and engaging in collaborative learning activities. These interactional practices indicate that classroom power is dynamic rather than fixed and develops through everyday communication between teachers and learners.

The analysis further revealed that supportive discourse practices, including inclusive lexical choices, open-ended questions, constructive feedback, and learner-centered interaction, significantly enhanced students' confidence, participation, and communicative competence. In contrast, highly teacher-dominated communication limited opportunities for dialogue and critical thinking. The application of Fairclough's (1995) Three-Dimensional Model and Foucault's (1977, 1980) theory of power provided valuable insights into the relationship between language, institutional authority, and classroom interaction. Overall, the study concludes that effective English language teaching requires a balanced approach in which teachers maintain academic guidance while encouraging active learner participation. Such classrooms promote meaningful communication, collaborative knowledge construction, critical thinking, and greater learner autonomy. The findings therefore offer practical implications for English language teachers, curriculum developers, and educational policymakers seeking to strengthen communicative language teaching and learner-centered education in Pakistani higher education.

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