SOCIOCULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE USE IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS: A MICRO-ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

Iwan Jazadi [1]
[1] Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, STKIP Paracendekia NW Sumbawa,
Email penulis pertama: iwanjazadi@stkipparacendekianw.ac.id

Article Info

Abstract

This study explores the sociocultural dimensions of spoken language use in educational contexts through a micro-ethnographic analysis of three naturally occurring speech events in a tertiary institution. Grounded in sociocultural discourse analysis and systemic functional linguistics, the research examines how cultural norms, institutional expectations, and power relations shape classroom talk. Data were collected via unobtrusive naturalistic observation and analyzed using frameworks by Mercer and Halliday to interpret the interplay between linguistic form and social function. Findings reveal that indirectness, pragmatic misalignment, and minimalist engagement reflect speakers' cultural backgrounds, identity negotiations, and stages of language acquisition. The study underscores spoken discourse as a vehicle for enacting identity, asserting agency, and navigating institutional hierarchies, particularly in multicultural and multilingual settings. Pedagogical implications include the need for enhanced pragmatic instruction, awareness of discourse asymmetries, and inclusive communication strategies in language education. This work contributes to our understanding of how spoken interactions function as sociocultural acts within educational environments

✉ Corresponding author:
Email Address: iwanjazadi@stkipparacendekianw.ac.id

INTRODUCTION

Spoken language is not merely a tool for communication but a deeply embedded social act that reflects cultural norms, institutional roles, and power relations within educational settings. In contemporary educational discourse, spoken interactions are shaped not only by linguistic competence but also by sociocultural expectations, contextual roles, and interpersonal dynamics. As globalization intensifies linguistic diversity in classrooms, understanding how spoken language functions within educational contexts becomes essential for informed pedagogical practice, particularly in settings involving second language learners.

Scholars have long emphasized the need to examine language use through a sociocultural lens. Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (1994) introduced a model that views

language as a social semiotic system, emphasizing the interplay of field (what is happening), tenor (roles and relationships), and mode (channel of communication). Building on this, Hymes' ethnography of communication (1964) and Gee's discourse theory (2015) argue that meaning in interaction is deeply tied to cultural and institutional norms. These frameworks have proven crucial in analyzing how speakers negotiate meaning, display identity, and navigate authority within the classroom.

Recent research confirms that educational discourse is profoundly shaped by sociocultural dynamics. Zhaksybayeva (2023) highlights the dialogic nature of classroom talk, illustrating how discourse practices foster or hinder student participation and critical thinking. Castelnuovo (2015), through an intercultural discourse analysis of Italian pupils, emphasizes that students' sociocultural backgrounds significantly influence their verbal contributions and responsiveness. This supports Gotti's (2012) finding that discourse varies not only by language proficiency but also by cultural identity and educational expectations.

Further, Kochetkov and Kovalevich (2020) argue that pedagogical discourse must be understood in relation to the "zone of proximal development," where a teacher's speech acts are tightly linked to students' developmental readiness. Their work underscores the importance of sociocultural scaffolding in dialogic education. In similar vein, Chernova (2022) emphasizes the role of school discourse in shaping both educational traditions and students' cultural worldviews.

Despite these advances, much of the current research has prioritized written academic discourse, leaving everyday spoken interactions in multicultural, multilingual classrooms underexplored. This study addresses this gap by analyzing three naturally occurring speech events within a tertiary educational context. By adopting a sociocultural discourse analytic framework, the study aims to examine how spoken interactions are influenced by cultural norms, institutional expectations, and identity negotiations. The insights derived have critical implications for language and literacy educators, particularly in TESOL and multilingual learning environments, where pragmatic competence and cultural sensitivity are essential for fostering inclusive, effective communication

METHODS
Research Design

This study employed a qualitative micro-ethnographic approach, grounded in sociocultural theory, to investigate how spoken language is used and interpreted within real-life educational settings. The research is theoretically anchored in Vygotskyan principles that view language as both a cognitive and cultural tool, mediating meaning-making and shaping social relationships (Mercer, 2007). In particular, the study draws on Sociocultural Discourse Analysis (SDA), a framework that conceptualizes talk as a "social mode of thinking," enabling participants to co-construct understanding, assert identity, and navigate institutional expectations (Mercer, 2007; Johnson & Mercer, 2019).

Setting and Participants

The context of the study was a tertiary educational institution in South Australia, where authentic spoken interactions were observed and documented. The three speech events analyzed occurred in naturalistic settings: a spontaneous peer conversation between international students near a university cafeteria; a transactional exchange between a postgraduate student and a librarian at a front desk; and an instructional library tour involving ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) learners. These diverse events were selected to provide variation in setting, participant roles, and communicative purposes, capturing a broad spectrum of sociocultural dynamics

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through naturalistic observation using unobtrusive field note-taking, allowing the researcher to record both verbal utterances and accompanying non-verbal behaviors. In line with ethnographic practices advocated by Green and Kelly (2018), the researcher minimized intrusion by blending into the environment and writing observational notes during and immediately after the events. These notes were later transcribed into structured, dialogue-like scripts that preserved the sequence and rhythm of speech, along with relevant paralinguistic features such as pauses, gestures, tone shifts, and gaze. This approach allowed for rich contextualization while ensuring ecological validity.

Analytical Framework

The analytic framework combined Mercer's SDA with Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Mercer's model enabled the categorization of classroom talk into types such as exploratory, cumulative, and disputational discourse, facilitating the identification of epistemic functions and social positioning strategies embedded in spoken interactions. Meanwhile, Halliday's (1994) triadic model of field, tenor, and mode was used to map the semantic roles and communicative goals of each speaker in context, allowing for a layered interpretation of how language reflected and reinforced cultural scripts and institutional power dynamics. The integration of both frameworks provided a robust lens for analyzing not only the functional features of discourse but also the underlying sociocultural logics that shaped them.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

To ensure analytic rigor and trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. Thick description was used to contextualize each speech event in detail, allowing readers to grasp the situated meanings of utterances. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytical process by documenting interpretive decisions through analytic memos. Given the dual role of the researcher as observer and analyst, special attention was paid to mitigating personal bias, particularly when interpreting indirectness, politeness strategies, or perceived power asymmetries. Peer debriefing

sessions with TESOL educators and applied linguistics scholars were used to validate emerging interpretations and refine analytical categories. This methodological stance not only aligns with sociocultural principles but also enhances the transparency and transferability of findings (Forman & McCormick, 1995; Castelnuovo, 2015)

RESULTS AND SOCIOCULTURAL ANALYSIS

This section presents the findings from three naturally occurring speech events observed in educational contexts. Each interaction is analyzed using a sociocultural discourse framework to uncover how language choices reflect cultural norms, institutional roles, and power dynamics. The emphasis is on interpreting how meaning is pragmatically and socially co-constructed in specific settings.

Speech Event I: Indirectness as a Politeness Strategy in Peer Conversation

The first interaction took place around midday at a seating area in front of the cafeteria on a university campus. Two international students — likely Indonesian and Malaysian — were engaged in an animated, impromptu conversation. Toward the end of the interaction, one participant (A) subtly signaled his intent to conclude the conversation through a series of indirect cues:

(1) A: (looked at his watch in a rather hiding manner) Well, I think we've got a lot from the discussion, right?
(2) B: Yea, yea… (continued talking quite long) …
(3) A: I think that's the point we've made (again looked at his watch in the same way)
(4) B: That's it… (pause)
(5) A: (no verbal response, just a smile)
(6) B: By the way, I think our discussion is enough, you must have something to do now, don't you?
(7) A: Not really, but yea, I've got to go anyway.

This exchange highlights the use of pragmatic politeness strategies, particularly in high-context communication cultures where direct refusals or conversation closures may be perceived as rude. A's use of softeners ("Well, I think"), inclusive language ("we've got"), and mitigated assertions ("right?") functions to reduce imposition and elicit mutual agreement. His repeated glances at his watch, accompanied by vague verbal conclusions, suggest a preference for non-confrontational disengagement.

B's prolonged response in turn (2) may reflect either a failure to perceive the cue or a conscious effort to prolong the interaction. However, by turn (6), B seems to recognize and reciprocate A's intent, explicitly offering the closing move. A's final verbal confirmation and earlier nonverbal smile suggest satisfaction with the mutual, face-saving resolution. This interaction exemplifies the sociocultural value placed on indirectness, harmony, and shared closure in interpersonal discourse among speakers from collectivist cultures

Speech Event II: Transactional Disruption and Identity Negotiation at the Library Desk

The second event occurred at the Language Center library's front desk, where a student (M) attempted to return a book that had previously been renewed. Due to a confusion over the book's classification — which closely resembled another high-demand, non-renewable item — the librarian (L) reacted sharply:

(8) L: It's because you are greedy
(9) M: (a bit surprised) Greedy? The clerk that time had processed in the computer and she said all right…
(10) L: You're greedy… you know greedy?
(11) M: Yes…
(12) L: You think only you need this book; 25 students are wanting it. This book is one-week loan and no extension
(13) M: (saw the cover) Oh no, that one is different…

This exchange illustrates a breakdown in transactional discourse, marked by misinterpretation and escalated interpersonal tension. The librarian's initial labeling of the student as "greedy" not only violates expected politeness norms in service interactions but also functions as a face-threatening act. Her repetition and rhetorical questioning in (10) — "you know greedy?" — implies doubt not just about the student's behavior, but also his linguistic and cultural comprehension.

The student's measured defense in (9) and (11), combined with his surprise, reflects a dual attempt to clarify facts and navigate institutional authority. His utterance in (13) reorients the conversation toward resolving the misunderstanding, but by then, the power asymmetry has already foregrounded an institutional framing where student voices may be perceived as subordinate.

This speech event underscores how institutional gatekeeping and implicit cultural assumptions can influence discourse. The interaction showcases how pragmatic misalignment — shaped by identity, role perception, and linguistic authority — can exacerbate communicative conflict, particularly for international students operating in unfamiliar institutional discourses

Speech Event III: Minimalist Engagement in a Guided Library Tour

The final event involved a small group of ELICOS students participating in a guided library tour led by a librarian. The students, newly arrived and early in their English language development, responded minimally to verbal prompts:

(14) T: This is the reference collection… (long explanation, while pointing to the related items) … these are dictionary, Longman, Oxford.
(15) S: Longman, Oxford…

Later, during an invitation for questions:

(16) T: … (long explanation), any questions?
(17) S: No, not yet

And again when students were stimulated by visual cues:

(18) S: … what this (pointing to a slank board beside the reference collection)
(19) S: … and that? (in the same way)

The students' brief, often echoed responses reflect early interlanguage development and limited communicative confidence. Their reliance on repetition and concrete referents indicates a stage where receptive skills may outweigh expressive capacity. Moreover, their passivity in the interaction — marked by silence, limited vocabulary, and lack of elaboration — should not be mistaken for disinterest. Rather, it may represent a culturally conditioned deference to authority and an effort to avoid error or embarrassment in a public setting.

The librarian's monologic delivery and occasional prompting further emphasize the asymmetrical discourse roles: the teacher as knowledge-holder and students as passive receivers. This scenario reflects broader patterns in early second language socialization, where learners are still acquiring both the linguistic tools and sociocultural norms necessary for confident participation in institutional discourse

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the three speech events highlights how spoken discourse in educational settings is deeply shaped by sociocultural norms, institutional roles, and power dynamics. While each event is contextually distinct, they collectively reveal how participants use language not merely to convey information but to negotiate identity, perform politeness, and navigate asymmetrical relationships. These findings reinforce the view that spoken language in education is a sociocultural activity, embedded in power structures and communicative conventions (Mercer, 2007; Forman & McCormick, 1995).

In the first speech event, the strategic use of indirectness by speaker A illustrates a discourse feature that aligns with Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, particularly the use of negative politeness to minimize imposition. The participant's reliance on hedging, gaze aversion, and nonverbal cues indicates an orientation toward maintaining social harmony, a value often associated with collectivist cultures. These findings are consistent with Alguwaidi et al. (2014), who found that politeness strategies are not merely linguistic choices but are shaped by cultural perceptions of hierarchy and relational obligation, especially in educational discourse.

The second event, involving the librarian and the student, foregrounds how power operates through language in institutional contexts. The librarian's labeling of the student as "greedy" and subsequent rhetorical interrogation not only challenged the student's institutional standing but also their linguistic legitimacy. This echoes Bustrum's (2001) findings in ESL classrooms, where students with limited cultural capital and English proficiency often experience discourse as a form of gatekeeping. In such cases, language

becomes a proxy for institutional control, reinforcing the unequal distribution of communicative power. Importantly, this event also illustrates how resistance can be enacted through measured politeness and clarification attempts — strategies that allow marginalized speakers to assert agency within constrained discursive spaces.

The third speech event, though devoid of overt conflict, illustrates a different dimension of sociocultural discourse: learner positioning. The ELICOS students' minimalist responses and echoic utterances exemplify early-stage second language development, where expressive capabilities are limited and classroom talk is often teacher-dominated. Mercer (2007) and Johnson & Mercer (2019) argue that such asymmetries are common in instructional settings where talk is used didactically rather than dialogically. The lack of extended student talk reflects a communicative gap shaped not only by linguistic limitations but also by cultural norms regarding teacher authority and appropriate student behavior. As Kelly and Green (2018) note, recognizing these patterns is essential for educators aiming to design inclusive, interaction-rich environments.

Taken together, these events reflect broader principles of sociocultural theory: that language is both shaped by and shapes the social context in which it is used. Each speaker's choices — whether to mitigate, confront, defer, or remain silent — are not simply linguistic but index broader cultural logics and institutional expectations. This supports the argument made by Forman and McCormick (1995) that discourse analysis in education must move beyond surface features to explore how language mediates learning, identity, and access.

Moreover, the data affirm that sociocultural discourse analysis (SDA) is a powerful lens for capturing the nuanced interplay between talk, power, and culture. As shown in professional and academic settings alike, SDA reveals how language contributes to — and is constrained by — the participants' institutional roles, cultural assumptions, and perceived authority (Johnson & Mercer, 2019). By attending to the pragmatic, relational, and contextual dimensions of spoken interactions, this framework makes visible the often invisible dynamics that shape educational communication.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that spoken language use in educational settings is a socioculturally rich phenomenon, where utterances serve not only as carriers of meaning but also as instruments for enacting identity, negotiating power, and navigating institutional norms. Through a micro-ethnographic analysis of three naturally occurring speech events, the findings revealed how indirectness, communicative asymmetry, and pragmatic minimalism are shaped by cultural backgrounds, role expectations, and stages of language acquisition.

In particular, the analysis affirmed that indirectness in peer talk serves as a culturally embedded strategy for maintaining social harmony, while transactional misalignment in institutional settings may reflect deeper tensions surrounding power, legitimacy, and communicative access. Similarly, the minimal participation of novice ESL learners in

guided instruction highlights the dual challenges of linguistic limitation and cultural socialization in second language contexts.

These findings carry several key pedagogical implications. First, language educators must move beyond a narrow focus on grammatical accuracy and instead cultivate learners' pragmatic and sociocultural competence. This includes explicit instruction on speech acts, politeness strategies, and institutional discourse norms that are often assumed rather than taught. Second, instructors should be mindful of power differentials that may inhibit learner participation, particularly in formal interactions. Adopting a dialogic pedagogy that values exploratory talk and co-construction of meaning can help flatten hierarchical discourse structures and empower learners as active contributors.

Third, language programs should incorporate critical discourse awareness into teacher training and curriculum design, enabling both educators and learners to recognize how institutional language can include or exclude, validate or marginalize. Using authentic speech events — such as those presented in this study — as classroom materials can promote reflective analysis and discussion, bridging the gap between theory and lived communicative experience.

In sum, spoken language in educational settings is never neutral. It is shaped by — and in turn shapes — the sociocultural worlds of its users. By attending to the subtle dynamics of face-to-face talk, educators can foster more inclusive, equitable, and effective learning environments that acknowledge the full humanity and diversity of their learners

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