A Discourse Analysis: Elementary School Teachers' Perceptions of Multiculturalism

Ihsan Seyit ERTEM
Assistant Professor
Gazi University, College of Education
D Blok Teknikokullar-Ankara 06500
Turkey

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to understand the multicultural perceptions of elementary teachers. Teachers' comment on a non-print text to view on the role of discourse in meaning process was examined in the research. The subjects were four elementary school teachers from two different countries. The method of research was discourse analysis that inquires about to explicate the inter-related social, cultural aspects of language-in-use within elementary teachers. Elementary school teachers' experiences and explanations were analyzed without any previous assumptions. After discourse analysis; culture, intertextuality, generalization, discourse, gender and, role of school emerged as major themes. The findings indicate that during speaking elementary teachers negotiated their meanings, values, identities, politics, and semiotics. The interactions among teachers who have the different cultural background impeded their prejudice and stereotype to others and offering a non-print text (multicultural movie) can provide an important function in building teachers' awareness about multiculturalism.

Keywords: Discourse analysis, multiculturalism, multicultural education, elementary school teacher

1. Introduction

When we speak, we consider the particular situation in which we are communicating. "We fit our language to a situation or context that our language, in turn, helped to create in the first place" (Gee, 1999, p.11). People always build and rebuild reality not just by dint of the language, they employ but through language as discourse, i.e., language used in tandem with non-linguistic cues and symbol systems, tools, actions, interactions, technologies, and particular ways of thinking, feeling, or believing. Gee (1999) has also mentioned building six areas of reality during speaking. These are (1) the meaning and value of aspects of the material world, (2) activities, (3) identities and relationships, (4) politics, (5) connections, and (6) semiotics. Meaning is not abstract but social and cultural practices and it is shaped by the culture, society, social institutions within which we live in (p.63). If the relationship between meaning-making and culture is so essential, what is the meaning of culture? Smagaorinsky pointed out that (2001) culture refer to the persistent social practices and their artifacts that present order, purpose, and continuity to social life. Culture is motivated by movement toward a shared ideal destination. This ideal symbolizes the mutual values of the community in question. Movement toward that ideal is enabled and constrained by persistent social practices that are aided by tools that produce the artifacts, including texts that provide a reasonably shared meaning for life within the culture.

Fairclough claimed that language is social practice not an autonomous construct (1989, p.vi). No question there is the relationship between language and society, our conversations are socially determined. In other words, "discourse" customized in context, and cultural knowledge (cultural models) is activated by context (Gee, 1999, p.63). However, according to Fairclough (1989, p.23), there is no symmetrical relationship between language and society; the whole is society, and language is one strand of the social. Fairclough also introduces another term that of subject positions used in Fairclough, which better illustrates how discourse determines and is determined by social structures.

One of the aspects of the study was multiculturalism. According to Moya (2001), multiculturalism means the appreciation, tolerance, understanding, and celebration of difference in cultural practices, ethnicity, language, religion, and the like. Multicultural education is the teaching of cultural differences or, even more simply, historical and geographical facts. Another word, it is the promotion of understanding, respect, and acceptance of cultural diversity within the society.

While multiculturalism has comprehensive and big perspective, multicultural education focuses on individual, educational and teaching dimensions of multicultural perspective like anti racist education, curriculum reform, elimination of negative cultural stereotypes and teaching cultural diversity. Multicultural education not only as an instructional product but as a continuous process involving (1) reflection, learning and the development of cultural self-awareness, (2) the acceptance of conflict for its educational potential, (3) the willingness to learn about one's own cultural reality from interaction with others, (4) the improvement of communication with people from other cultures, and (5) the recognition of the universality of multiculturalism (Moya, 2001). Multicultural education couples with anti-racism education. Anti-racism education promotes the elimination of racism through identifying and changing institutional policies and practices as well as identifying individual attitudes and behaviors that contribute to racism.

The ultimate success of multicultural education in school depends on the teachers (Nel, 1992). Teachers should be familiar with the values of multiculturalism in order to encourage an environment favorable to learning. Unfortunately, the current teacher education programs are ineffective on the application of multicultural education (Dedeoglu, 2007). According to research findings, main issue is that teachers put into practice little of multiculturalism in their classrooms, although they are supportive of it (Black, 2010). Culpepper (2003) conducted a study tested for differences in teachers' perceptions of multiculturalism in schools. Even though result of his study demonstrated that elementary teachers are more perceptive of multiculturalism in the school and use appropriate instructional practices more readily than do secondary teachers, elementary teachers far away from ultimate classroom performance. The issues in multiculturalism need to be sighted from multi perspectives such as social class, gender, religion. Teacher education programs (both pre-service and in-service teacher training programs) should clearly define concept of multiculturalism in terms of educational implications and larger societal context (Dedeoglu, 2007).

Cultural identify and cultural victimization are also used to criticize the existence of such schools. Meyer (2001) says while others feel by creating schools that affirm group bonds and empower the community, and everyone within the community who has experienced cultural victimization may choose to enroll in the schools, then separate is not inherently equal, it may instead be a means to challenge dominant groups and become equal. Unfortunately, even today, it is too popular that students are separated by dominant groups because of differences. We can see clearly this situation in some children books. But separating promotes the stereotypes and these individuals are being asserted that they have characteristics determined solely by their race.

The purpose of this study was to understand the multicultural perceptions of elementary teachers. The research questions that guide this study include:

- How meaning is created within elementary teachers?
- How teachers do use social language and various symbol systems during discussion of a non-print text (a multicultural movie)?
- How are teachers' interpretations of the multiculturalism?

This study was concerned with the construction of discourse between the elementary school teachers. How the teachers negotiated meaning during their discussion. Thus, teachers' comment on a non-print text to view on the role of discourse in meaning process was examined in the research.

2. Methodology
2.1. Data Collection

The method of research was a form of discourse analysis that inquires about to explicate the inter-related social, cultural aspects of language-in-use within a specific group (teachers). Discourse analysis is the application of critical thought to social situations and the unveiling of hidden politics within the socially dominant as well as all other discourses (interpretations of the world, belief systems, etc.). Discourse analysis can be useful to any text that is to any problem or situation. Since Discourse analysis is basically an interpretative and deconstructing reading, there are no specific guidelines to follow. The purpose of Discourse analysis is not to provide definite answers, but to expand our personal horizons and make us realize our own shortcomings and unacknowledged agendas as well as that of others (Adzkiyah, 2012). A movie "Dangerous Minds" (Directed by John N. Smith 1995) was used as a non-print text during discussion. Discussion was lasted an hour and fifteen minutes. Dangerous Minds is based on the job of an English teacher in East Palo Alto high school, place where the majority of students are Latinos and African American from troubled inner-city neighborhoods.

The discussion started after watched the multicultural film. Types of questions were semi-structured. The researcher observed, and recorded the responses/interpretations of participants as they watch and discuss a non-print text.

2.2. Participants

This study was mainly based on a discussion about a non-printed text (multicultural movie) of four international teachers which one of them is from Turkey and three of them are from USA. The four-elementary school teachers, three males and one female, come from working-class and middle-class families, participated in this study. The participants were between thirty and thirty-five years of age. All participants have had five or more years teaching experience. The participants had completed four year their bachelors' degree studies.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis process occurred in four stages: a) detection, b) coding c) displaying data, and d) interpreting the data. The written field notes and the discussion transcripts were analyzed to gain insight into how participants make sense of non-print text. In addition, following three of basic criterions, borrowed from Burbules and Bruce (2001), considered during data analysis:

- Who is speaking? Forms of discourse are socially and culturally composed. How individuals and group prefer to speak, the inferences people make in interpreting the speech of other members of group, and so on. Discourse is created differently among social and cultural groups.
- Where people speak. Discourse takes place in physical settings and circumstances, situated in space and time. For example, whether speakers are standing or sitting; smiling or winking. How are their emotions?
- How people speak. Humans use a variety of ways, consciously and unconsciously, to express meaning and intent (the mode of discourse).

After the recording was completed, each of the audiotapes was transcribed. Elementary school teachers' experiences and explanations were analyzed without any previous assumptions. Open coding was used to find important points. During discourse analysis process, a number of patterns were found, and major themes developed. Especially, participants' experiences, researcher's experience and inter-relations both of them were considered during discourse analysis process. Researcher's personal notes, field notes as well as theoretical notes were used in data analysis.

3. Findings

3.1. Culture

Meaning does not exist in a vacuum and, meaning is determined by the society and culture. In other words, culture, society, social institutions play a significant role in making meaning process. In the study, although the teachers watched the same movie, their comments were entirely different. It was clear that their cultural backgrounds were effective on their comments. Smagorinsky (2001) says, different meanings to different readers, or no meaning at all to other readers, the same implement may serve as different tools to different users, or no tool at all to other users, or a different tool to the same user in different situations, depending on how (or if at all) it is conceptualized. The manner in which it is conceptualized is a function of culture, the next term that requires definition.

During data analysis process, many cultural bits and pieces were found in transcription. The teachers engaged with texts in such a way as to produce transactions and transformations. The reader constructed the meaning of texts in reading. These constructions, while idiosyncratic, were culturally mediated, locating meaning not only in the reader and text but also in the culture that has preceded and conditioned both and in the social practices that provided the immediate environment of reading (Smagorinsky, 2001). The evocations were also culturally grounded. While two of participants focused on teacher and teacher's methods in movie, the others focused on choice. This can be a good example of what non-print text was evacuated people who are dissimilar origin.

R: What is main message in the movie?
S3: I don't know. I think one big thing: choice; take your responsibility in your action something. I think another aspect If people have issues they need more help. Making choices and right choices.
S1: You always have choices; you'll find right way.
S4: Students don't need hero; they need teachers.

S2: I agree with S4. We don't need heroes, also other than teachers' efforts. Also even they're Hispanic, how other cultures students should also do something they don't pay attention even a hero can't do anything.

3.2. Intertextuality

Evocations or reader-composed texts that provide the basis for intertextuality and meaning construction; that is, rather than connecting the texts that they read, readers connect their own evocations of those texts, which in turn become texts that potentially generate new evocations. Because meaning comes from composing new texts and evocations differ from reader to reader, the meaning that readers construct is inherently idiosyncratic (Smagorinsky, 2001). The transcript included some intertextual meaning construction that non-print text generated new evocations of participant.

3.3. Generalization

Some of the teachers tended to generalize multicultural problems to all U.S. schools like in the movie. But another teacher pointed out that that the movie does not represent all the schools. Second speaker (female) mentioned that today even second grade students are the same with high school students presented in the movie. The other generalization or stereotype example in discussion is that Hispanic, African American, students are poor and coming from low socioeconomic families, urban students are poor; Asian-American students are hardworking and so on. Generalization prevents inner conflict of teachers and make easy for them to understand some complex and non-clear social structure.

For example:
S2: But is not, it interesting that those poor socioeconomic class people are Hispanic or African American.
S1: Mostly.
S2: But not white majority. White majority is not that poor. So I think.
S1: That more percentage that more whites who are poor then any minorities. Numbers of whites.
S2: Yeah but if you compare the numbers uhh you know mostly mostly African American or Hispanic people are poorest people.
S1: And did mention that because one of the students who is white student who was saying he is tired of the all the minorities has the father has to hire all these minorities remember that succeeds and then one I think a black he get up and said your father white right? He is farmer. Any other black farmers I mean both are in the same side, both are farmers.
…
S4: I think Asian people are hardworking in the society most of Asian kids help their families.
S3: Chinese students have also their values.
S2: Asian families encourage their kids. We have little orchestra consist of little kids. Most of those kids are from Korea or from Taiwan.

3.4. Discourse

The teachers used different social language in discussion. Discourse types vary across cultures and persons but it is very likely that the dominant persons use powerful discourse type. The transcription of this discussion recorded 85 separated speaking turns. First teacher S1 spoke 26 times, second teacher (S2) (female) spoke 29 times, third teacher (S3) spoke 10 times, and fourth teacher (S4) spoke 20 times. The expectation was for female participant that she would not able to use powerful discourse in group because of only female participant. However, she was the most talking participant in discussion. There is relationship between discourse type and personhood. In addition, there are certain differences among teachers speaking style. During discussion, the teachers applied often their teaching experience and made meaningful connection between non-print text and their life.

3.5. Gender Difference

It was obvious that male perspectives and female perspectives were different. While female participants got attention teacher's dress, pregnancy; male participants were focus on different subjects like social class and school administration.
For example:
…
S2:   The pregnant girl, Callie, in the movie had to work, and she can't attend to school because of the administration, because they've rules. I don't know if pregnant girls can attend school in a state and cannot in another, if so, it is not fair. It is not equal opportunity.

S1:   That's right. In America is more democratic than everybody. Has to same thing.

S2:   Callie represents all females who in trouble or pregnant or have to work.

S4:   How about curriculum limitation? Administration criticizes that the topics like that so they criticizes her job she is teaching karate.

S3:   It is just ridiculous. The principal react in there. She was new teacher. Yeah. The curriculum is very very wide and not deep at all. I never follow the curriculum. You know it does depend on situation.

...

S2:   Do you think something about dress? You know teacher's dressing up. For example, I think it is interesting. She was at first wearing you know skirt something like that female dresses she she Ok. She is so classical. But they were wearing just jeans and you know what else. T-shirts yeah you know she began to dress up exactly like that. So she can approaches her student friendly or maybe she is trying to tell them Ok. I am not your teacher I am your friend, uhh, I am not different from you although I am a white middle class female so I don't know.

S4:   I think it wasn't just a dress. I was gonna say that, I think in some classrooms that the higher socioeconomic status people understand teacher and the student relationship is maybe different that teacher help students in the class also help in their life. And maybe the relationship is totally different. The students may see teacher as policeman or authority so maybe they don't want an authority figure teacher, so the teacher has to be friendly.

3.6. Role of School

As social institutions, schools do not eliminate but establish power. Of course, they have many goals of school to install values, to help students acquire skills, and so forth; yet, one of the most important goals of education is the acquisition and development of possible ways of using language. The teachers have power and knowledge, and force the students to pay obeisance. Probably participants see the teacher as an authority figure and they want to change role of teacher. The teachers often applied compare contrast during interpretation of non-print text. For example: they compared Turkish education system and the United States education system, administration and curriculum. And also they blamed middle class curriculum for inadequate of multiculturalism.

For example:

…

S4:   Turkish education system is different, because there is hard discipline.

S2:   Yeah. We see teachers as authority figures.

S4:   But students cannot behave in the same way that those kids behave.

S1:   So what happen?

S2:   This is the rule. They can't attend the school.

S1:   In Turkey, if you go to school you have a better position in life? But it doesn't necessary in America, so it might be the reason. They might be smart but they are going different parts, races, color, may be in Turkish students are more about the school because they know that they'll have a better job opportunity.

S4:   Even their families force them to be educated and those students can't have alternative, or jobs, if they don't study. Well behaving one of the main goals of the curriculum.

S2:   Maybe this is not freedom. (Laughing). But this is the discipline in our country and it really works. If you ask me, I taught 6 years at the high school, it works. In my country teachers are very strict; they are not easy going, whatever teacher says it happens. And it is not the same here, so at first I was confused and then, you know. But how it is other experience learning another point of view but in turkey, yeah, it is not the same. We have urban area kids, poor kids. If they're educated they can do anything. They can be president. Being from other races. It doesn't matter. If the people are well educated they can do anything.

S1:   This is difference though, because in America is not necessary true. You can be really supposed to be that way but you don't have a chance if you attend a poor school. First students get a lot of jobs after workshops.

…

4. Discussions and Conclusions

The findings indicate that the conversations are socially determined, discourse customized in context, and cultural knowledge is activated by context. During speaking, elementary teachers negotiated their meanings, values, identities, politics, and semiotics.

The interactions among teachers the different cultural background impeded their prejudice and stereotype to others and promoted respect, and acceptance of cultural diversity within the society. The main finding of this study is that offering a non-print text (multicultural movie) can serve an important function in building teachers' awareness about multiculturalism and it is a useful tool. Proof from the present discourse analysis revealed and it is consistent with the results of research conducted by Dedeoglu (2007) that multiculturalism needs to be sighted from multi perspectives such as culture, social class, gender, and religion. When teachers have had the confidence about multiculturalism, they will deal with easily issues regarding the education of students from diverse backgrounds (Acquah and Commins, 2013).

In conclusion, the results are important because the present study helped to understand how personhood, gender differences, and cultural differences contribute to teachers' comments. There is a vital need for teacher incorporate multicultural perspectives into classrooms. This discourse analysis does not contain multicultural perception of all elementary school teachers because of limited number of elementary teachers participated in the study. Multiculturalism is a unique area for research in education. Although there are a number of resources about this subject, the need do more specific and detail researches in this area. This kind of studies will help teachers to expand first-hand information that will challenge societal and preconceived stereotypes about people who are different from themselves (Acquah and Commins, 2013).

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