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The Power of EFL Student-Researchers: A Critical Discourse Analysis Project “Hey, teachers, leave them kids alone”

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Abstract

Learner autonomy has been called for by many researchers in language teaching. Learner independence can be achieved through empowering students (Ss) by training them on ways to learn certain learning strategies rather than just teaching them certain linguistic features. This goal can be attained through implementing the learner-as-researcher approach called for by many researchers due to its potential ability to involve Ss in their learning process. This paper presents the findings of a multifaceted action research project intended to enhance Ss' critical skills through implementing the Riggenbach Model (1999) to a linguistic micro aspect; learn more about Teacher –Student (T-S) interactions through critically analyzing a number of T-S interactions using Dobbs' analysis model presented in Celce-Murcia and Olstein (2000), and use critical classroom discourse analysis (CCDA) to provide a macro-analytic explanation of identity and power relations of the Ss by examining student reflections and final products.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, critical thinking, critical discourse analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy has been called for by many researchers in language teaching. Learner independence can be achieved through empowering Ss by training them on ways to learn certain learning strategies rather than just teaching them certain linguistic features. Thus, teachers should help Ss learn and benefit from the process of learning itself rather than simply focusing solely on the final linguistic product. This goal can be attained through implementing the learner as researcher approach called for by many researchers due to its potential ability to involve Ss in their learning process.

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1.2 Objective of the Paper

This paper presents the findings of a multifaceted action research project intended to:

1. Help Ss become involved in their learning process and enhance their critical skills through implementing the model by [Riggenbach \(1999\)](#) to a linguistic micro aspect.
2. Learn more about T-S interactions through critically analyzing a number of T-S interactions using Dobbs' analysis model presented in [Celce-Murcia and Olshtain \(2000\)](#).
3. Use CCDA (critical classroom discourse analysis) to provide a macro-analytic explanation of identity and power relations of the Ss by examining student reflections and final products.

1.3 Organization of the Paper

This paper is divided into three main parts corresponding to the three objectives of the project; these are as follows:

1. *Part I* presents the actual stages of the Riggenbach model and the T's self-reflection on the different T-S interactions.
2. *Part II* discusses Ss' social identity and power as reflected in their project products and reflection essays
3. *Part III* provides conclusions and recommendations are made.

2. PART I: THE RIGGENBACH MODEL

In this section of the paper the actual implementation of the [Riggenbach \(1999\)](#) Model is presented. In addition, a self-analysis of a number of instances of T-S interactions is analyzed employing the Dobbs' self-assessment checklist, as cited in [Celce-Murcia and Olshtain \(2000\)](#).

2.1 The Riggenbach Model: A Closer Look

2.1.1 Theoretical Objective

The objective of implementing this project was mainly to get Ss to discover the target language they are learning by being actively involved in their own learning process and thus becoming independent and autonomous learners. The call for learner autonomy has been the center of much of the research in the field of second language learning learner autonomy is achieved in the Riggenbach Model due to the fact that the learner is seen as a researcher rather than a passive recipient of knowledge. This method of the learner as researcher has been of particular interest to researchers in the field of pragmatics and sociolinguistics.

Another goal behind implementing this model was to promote cooperative learning through task-based learning. Although [Seedhouse \(2004\)](#) critiques Task-based learning for its overemphasis on the product at the expense of the process, task-based learning has gained strong grounds among a number of SL researchers. [Ellis \(2003\)](#), for example, calls for task based learning for he rightly believes that it allows Ss to work in

groups in a cooperative manner, and thus it allows a process of negotiation of meaning to exist which in return promotes learning. In addition, task based learning reflects the notion by Vygotsky (1986) of the expert and the novice where each member in the group is at some point either an expert and/or a novice. Thus, it seems that recent research in the field of SLA that has been in favor of things like learner autonomy, task based learning, and cooperative learning is seen to be reflected in this model and that is where this model gains its strength.

2.1.2 Pedagogical Objective

The intended learning outcome of this project was that Ss identify the difference(s) in use between the present perfect simple and the simple past tense. The choice of a grammatical micro aspect of language was due to the fact that the course covered by the class was a grammar course; and that researching a micro-level aspect would not be such a difficult task for EFL-learners as would a macro level aspect.

2.1.3 Class Demographics

Ss implementing the model were Ss of the Intensive English Program, ENG99 of the Spring semester of the academic year of 2006/2007. Their age ranges between 16-17 years and they are of intermediate proficiency level. Ss had been exposed to English for approximately 10 years prior to joining the program. Most of the Ss had been taught grammar in an explicit manner at school where the rule was explicitly presented to them. Thus, introducing this new way of teaching grammar to them in itself was a challenge especially that around 90% of the Ss is repeating the course and therefore has serious motivation problems.

2.2 Project Procedures

The following section summarizes the procedures of implementing the Riggensbach Model.

1. Ss were introduced to the project in a session that was recorded. After Ss had read a dialogue that includes the two target structures, Ss were asked to predict the difference between the two tenses based on their knowledge and prior learning experiences.
2. Ss were shown a very detailed outline including the stages of the task they were required to do which simply included:
 - a. Conducting an interview or collecting recorded authentic data from a talk show (see Appendix A for a copy of the project stages handout).
 - b. Analyzing the data using a very detailed analysis sheet provided by the teacher as an attempt to scaffold the whole analysis process which was really something new and challenging for these Ss (see Appendix B for a copy of the analysis sheet).
 - c. Ss were then required to make conclusions from the data they gathered and the patterns they found.
 - d. Ss were required to generate data that included the target structures and to figure out whether they can actually apply what they found in the data or not.
 - e. Ss were then required to reflect on the project, both in written for and orally in a recorded class session, and what they thought about it; an additional stage not

included in the Riggensbach Model (see Appendix C for a copy of the reflection handout)

2.3 Findings

Contrary to our expectations, some of the Ss were very excited about this project and they viewed it as a chance to do something new. This teaches teachers, paradoxical as it may seem, not to set dogmatic assumptions concerning their Ss but rather to leave space for proving those assumptions wrong. All in all, we think this was an excellent activity for the Ss and ourselves; they have learnt how to critically analyze data and question issues like how native speakers use the language as opposed to how they learn the language at school. In addition, we have benefited a lot from this activity as we were then equipped with a better grammar teaching method that could help motivate and involve our Ss. Moreover, this activity has taught us to trust the abilities of our Ss, and more importantly not to take assumptions we have about our Ss for granted; after all, they are only assumptions not facts.

The following section of part one provides a self-assessment of a number of T-S interactions.

2.4 Self-Assessment of Teacher Discourse

In this section of the paper, a self-assessment of our own discourse in the classroom is presented. The importance of such a procedure is that reflecting on one's own teaching discourse can help a teacher compare the assumed classroom discourse to the actual teacher discourse.

Our identities as teachers were only one among the multiple social identities we have. Each of these identities lends itself to a different discourse. Despite these diverse and multiple identities, there still maintains some commonalities among the different identities and consequently the different discourses because at the end of the day we are still individuals. To put it differently, just as people decide on what to wear depending on the occasion, people change their discourse to match context. That is why, when we watched ourselves teaching, we felt that we were other persons, not us; and the reason behind that, we believe, was that the person watching the video was no longer the teacher.

Having watched three full teaching sessions of ourselves, we comment on the negative features we see in two major aspects in our discourse; namely, content of discourse and delivery issues.

2.4.1 Content Issues

Based on the video, we think we were more authoritative than we should be. This authority was part and parcel of our teacher identity as well as our other identities. The authoritative aspect in our teaching was reflected in our use of imperative forms in giving directions and grabbing students' attention. In one instance, for example, while attempting to get a distracted students attention, one of us had said, "Hassan, stop it". That tone we believe is too authoritative; we could have achieved the same goal by involving the student in whatever we were doing. This finding seems to confirm the earlier analysis by [Kumaravadivelu \(1999, p. 455\)](#) in which he states that classroom

instruction is usually “unidimensional” and “unidirectional” (see Allwright (1980), Chaudron (1988), Long (1980) and Lier (1988) for further details).

A second content issue is our use of display questions more than referential ones. We think this is deeply rooted in our distrust in students’ abilities. We think we should trust our students more than that and empower their abilities; however, that is a big challenge considering the institutional power exercised on both teachers and students.

Finally, we think we had made a lot of false assumptions regarding what we believe students know or understand. That was reflected in the lack of sufficient understanding checks; because we assumed that students understood a certain target structure we moved on to the next. However, in the same session, a number of them committed errors in using that target structure, assumed by us to be easy and therefore understood.

Based on the above content of discourse self-assessment, we think we should be paying more attention to the language we use to provide directions and get students attention. In addition, we will try to make use of more referential questions and understanding checks.

2.4.2 *Delivery Issues*

A major problem we saw in our delivery was that we did not provide sufficient time for students to answer questions. In addition, our teaching pace was too fast and that could be an obstacle hindering students’ comprehension. In addition, we feel that we had a very intimidating voice which again can be seen as a result of this authoritative teacher identity we have. Another issue is that of student talk time which in comparison to teacher talk time was not quite enough. We think we should provide learning opportunities that can help maximize students’ talk time because that itself is a learning activity. Finally, we would like to say that we need to address all the above issues one at a time if we really want to overcome these teacher discourse draw backs.

3. PART II: CCDA, IDENTITY, AND POWER

3.1 Background

By attempting to achieve autonomy and assuming the role of researchers whilst engaging in an egalitarian group dynamic in which everyone must equally participate to successfully complete the assignment, this project required Ss to reconstruct their identities and traditional classroom power structures. This readjustment or recreation of the self and the classroom’s power dynamic will be examined through the critical classroom discourse analysis (CCDA) model, a macro-analytic model that intends to analyze discourse in terms of sociopolitical structures. CCDA approaches discourse with the assumption that all “discursive formations are political” (Kumaravadivelu, 1999, p. 460) in that they reflect some element of the real world or the larger sociocultural context. It also suggests that people may manipulate discourse to resist or legitimize certain identities and power relations. Through a CCDA of the Ss final reflections on their assignment and their final products, part III attempts to explain their perceptions and reactions to the various identities they were asked to construct and the power relations by which these identities were situated.

3.2 Methodology

CCDA was used as the model by which the student reflections were analyzed. Discourse, as defined by the Foucauldian CCDA model, is one of three types of formations (Newton, 1998). It is worth noting that according to Meyer (2001, p. 18) “there is no guiding theoretical viewpoint that is used consistently within CDA, nor do the CDA protagonist proceed consistently from the area of theory to the field of discourse and then back to theory”. The type of discourse as series of utterances or a text was the definition used in this section for approaching the data. The data were two types of texts: 1) reflections written by each student at the final stage of the assignment, and, 2) a videotaped class discussion in which the teacher facilitated a dialogue whereby students orally reflected on the assignment. Because CCDA is a macro-analytic approach specific utterances were not analyzed out of context, but rather the texts were analyzed as one discursive formation made up of smaller contextualized pieces. In other words, each written reflection was considered one discursive formation by a particular student and the video was considered one text collectively constructed by the participants. Thus, this approach is void of any micro-analysis and specific utterances are only cited in the findings section to illustrate the general results of the Ss reflections. Rather than focusing on a number of specific utterances, general attitudes and feelings were referred to and contextualized into a larger sociocultural framework in the analysis section.

3.3 Findings

All the data points to one very general but significant finding; a general distinction can be drawn across gender lines in regards to the Ss attitudes and feelings about the assignment. In other words, there was a very clear difference between the girls’ attitudes and the boys’ attitudes about the assignment. Since the groups were either all boys or all girls it was easy to make this observation and it may have further sociocultural implications. In both the written and oral texts, girls were generally more positive in their reflections, reporting an appreciation for the assignment as they felt they had learned quite a bit as researchers and in their specific groups. In stark contrast, the boys generally had very negative feelings about the assignment and reported feeling bored or not understanding the objective and how the project helped them in grammar. The following is a table¹ listing some of the differences in the girls’ and boys’ written and oral utterances.

¹Though not meant to be decontextualized, only excerpts of texts are displayed here for the sake of time and space. These excerpts though seemingly out of context as they are not provided within their original text are used to highlight the differences between attitudes. Each of their respective texts was considered in the analysis, and utterances that were not representative of that student’s general attitude were not used.

Table 1. The differences in the girls' and boys' written and oral utterances.

<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>
"I think this experience was so/very useful to me because through taping I know my neighbors closer and I was really happy/I benefited/have fun/ and also I knew the difference between the past simple and the present perfect." "I think it's very helpful to understand the usage of verb tenses." "I liked it so much because it made me understand more about the two tenses." I think that project is very useful and helpful as we found out that the grammar we study is different from the grammar in our speech." "I liked the idea of working a group a great deal and I enjoyed working with Mariam and Shagha. I think we became more friends after this project..." "It was helpful and interesting because it made me realize how useful what I study is." "I think that I had a great experience to work in a group..."	"This project was not good but I benefited a little." "I think that this project was not helpful." "Ms. what was the point of this assignment?" "It was not useful for me, we already know the difference between writing and speaking." "The project was boring." "I'd rather look for differences in stories." (i.e. novels). "The transcribing took too long."

It is also important to note that the boys' assignments were not as well done as the girls and not all of them provided written feedback. However, they did provide quite a bit of oral feedback during the class discussion, but they tended to dominate when giving negative feedback. These findings were confirmed by the teacher who agreed that the girls did appreciate the project more than the boys.

3.4 Analysis

Assuming that the Ss were honest in their reflections, these findings lead to the following questions: Why is there a general difference between the attitudes of the boys and girls in regards to this assignment and what does this difference indicate about gender and/or how males and females perceive identity and power?

The negative reaction of the boys can be attributed to a number of things. One reason for their reaction could be that they really found no benefit in the assignment. But then the question of why they did not benefit still arises. Another explanation for their reaction, and the most plausible one, is that the boys did not benefit because they did not re-construct their identities from the traditional passive student to the active researcher with ease or success. Also, they may have found it difficult to assume total control over their learning and share cooperatively and collaboratively in constructing new knowledge systems as a group.

This explanation is most likely as it is in line with the larger sociocultural context of the classroom. Most of these Ss were used to a very traditional male dominated classroom in which the teacher acts as the all-knowing messenger of vital information. Also, these classrooms are typically situated within the mainstream of a male

dominated society in which men, their knowledge systems and their beliefs and practices structure the discourses, the power relations, and identities of that society. In other words, these students are used to the male dominated norms of competition, hierarchical structures, and teacher fronted classrooms. Since these are typically male norms, women are often marginalized from these practices and systems and are regularly forced to recreate identity and power relations either by conforming to the norms or resisting them. Men however, fit very comfortably and snug into these systems as they are of the privileged classes and are therefore not forced to re-construct the 'self' or the power structures. This may explain the blatant difference between the girls' reaction and the boys' attitudes about this assignment. The girls may have found this assignment easier and more beneficial because it required that students change their typical passive student role into another 'self' and move into a more egalitarian group dynamic. Girls may have been more accepting of this requirement either because they were used to deconstructing and reconstructing multiple selves in order to move through society with ease, or because it questioned and allowed them to resist the typical male-dominated educational norms they were accustomed to.

On the other hand, the boys may have found it more difficult to fluidly re-create their 'selves' because they were not used to engaging in such resilient behaviors. Moreover, by working in a group dynamic where all were considered equal they were asked to further deconstruct the male dominated power structures of which they belong and were privileged by. They may have been unable to see the benefit of such an egalitarian dynamic simply because they were not accustomed to it, they do not have the skills to function within it, or they cannot conceptually conceive of an even playing field in which all must participate equally. Instead the boys engaged in passive resistance by providing negative feedback, refusing to do parts of the project, or doing it with little effort or enthusiasm. That is, rather than attempting to successfully recreate their identities and their typical power structures and see benefit in doing that, they completed the assignment in haste and with a very blatant negative reaction.

3.5 Final Remarks

The critical classroom discourse analysis of these findings allow us to conclude that a major difference in attitudes and feelings about the assignment can be associated with the students' gender because of the socio-political climate in which they come from or live in. It allows ascertaining the reasons why the Ss differed according to gender and points to the following concluding remarks²:

1. Girls found this assignment more beneficial because they were, as marginalized members of society, accustomed to re-constructing the self to conform or resist social norms.
2. Girls appreciated the group dynamic because it was all inclusive, a privilege they were often excluded from, and because it resisted typical male power dynamics.
3. Boys provided negative feedback and inadequate work in the assignment as a means to resist the requirement of deconstructing a system in which they were typically privileged.
4. Boys did not find the assignment beneficial because they either lack the skill or the ability to re-create the self with ease as they were not required to do so by society.

²These are generalized statements and there are of course exceptions to all of them.

5. Boys did not find the group work beneficial because they did not want, subconsciously or consciously, to dismantle the typical hierarchy of power from which they benefit.

4. PART III: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The participants in this project believe that it was very helpful to examine taken for granted issues like teacher-student and student-student discourse; and based on the findings of the project, the following set of recommendations are made:

1. Students should be encouraged to conduct out of class projects as they help broaden their views and involve them in their own learning processes.
2. Teachers should empower their students by trusting and believing in them and providing opportunities that reflect this trust.
3. Teachers should examine their own discourse and reflect on it, as it always provides more information on what actually goes on in the classroom.
4. Institutions should leave space for teachers and students to maximize learning through addressing learners' actual needs rather than dictated curricula.
5. Teacher self-assessment and reflection should be included in teacher training programs and incorporated with to help examine taken for granted practices.
6. Gender differences should be accounted for when creating task-based activities.
7. Teachers should use activities that empower typically marginalized students.
8. Teachers should find ways to address passive resistant behaviors.

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APPENDIX A

STAGES OF THE PROJECT

What will we be doing?

1. Conduct and record the interview/ the talk show:

Collect your data (the interview or the talk show you will record).

Make sure you record between 7-10 minutes to ensure that your data will include the target structure.

Then transcribe your data.

2. Analyze the interview:

Use the analysis sheet to analyze the data.

3. Make conclusions based on your findings:

Based on your analysis, what conclusions can you make about the target structure?

4. Generate:

Conduct an interview with the members of your group using the target structure.

Record your interview and then listen to it again to figure out whether the target structure was used correctly or not.

5. Reflection:

Write a reflection on the process of the research you conducted.

APPENDIX B

Name:

OBSERVATION/INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

After you have observed or interviewed your informant(s), use the following checklist to figure out how and when the target structures are used:

Question	Comment
How many times was the present perfect used?	
What contexts or situations did the present perfect occur in?	
Were there any key words that came with the present perfect, if yes what were they?	

Appendix B continued...

What differences did you find between your predictions about the use of the present perfect tense and the actual data you gathered?	
What similarities did you find between your predictions about the use of the present perfect tense and the actual data you gathered?	
What conclusions can you make about the usage of the present perfect simple tense?	
How many times was the past simple used?	
What contexts or situations did the past simple occur in?	
Were there any key words that came with the past simple, if yes what were they?	
What similarities did you find between your predictions about the use of the past simple tense and the actual data you gathered?	
What differences did you find between your predictions about the use of the past simple tense and the actual data you gathered?	
What conclusions can you make about the usage of the past simple tense?	

Additional Comments:

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APPENDIX C**Name:****Research Reflection Paper**

Write a one page reflection about what you think about the whole research project, whether you think it was helpful or not and why. What are some suggestions you can provide to improve the design of the project; in other words, what are some of the problems you faced in carrying out this project?

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