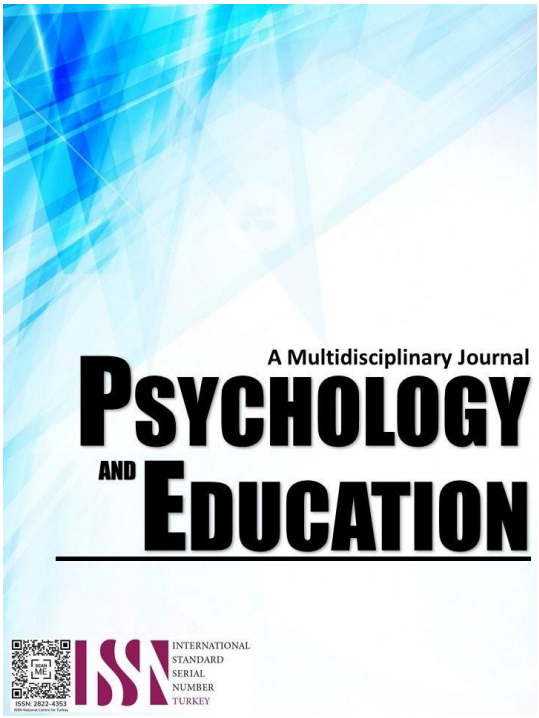
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ESL TEXTBOOK DISCOURSE IN THE PHILIPPINE SETTING



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Research Article

Critical Analysis of ESL Textbook Discourse in the Philippine Setting

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Abstract

English as a Second Language (ESL) textbooks play in teaching and learning is one reason academic institutions continue to purchase these learning resources. The use of commercial textbooks in elementary, secondary, and tertiary education is common practice. Textbooks provide useful resources for both educators and learners: information, content, texts, activities, and standardized instruction. The study was conducted to critically examine ESL textbook discourse situated in the Philippine setting, specifically, to critically examine how students positioned and conceptualized in the ESL textbook discourse in Oral Communication. The analysis found that: the author and the textbook assume an authoritative role over the student in the delivery of the text, the textbook discourse constructs unequal power relations between the author and the student; the student is positioned as subordinate and receiver of information, advices, instruction and direction; despite the unequal power relations between the textbook producers and students, the discourse constructs positive beliefs and assumptions about the students; the 21st century student is conceptualized as a socially active and responsible individual capable of meeting standards and excelling in different situations; the student must become a competent communicator but must be given holistic training and proper guidance as he or she has the tendency to become insensitive, disrespectful, and inconsiderate to others; and if the discourse is accepted as an authority, then this would contribute to sustaining the notion of textbook producer authority. Thus, textbook may be used by the teachers as aid in the classroom instruction because of its positive view towards the student the position and conceptualization of the teachers in the ESL textbook discourse may be studied teachers are encouraged to evaluate textbooks with a CDA point of view.

Keywords: *critical discourse analysis, English as a second language, social identity theory socio-cultural approach*

Introduction

English as a Second Language (ESL) textbooks play in teaching and learning is one reason academic institutions continue to purchase these learning resources. The use of commercial textbooks in elementary, secondary, and tertiary education is common practice. Textbooks provide useful resources for both educators and learners: information, content, texts, activities, and standardized instruction. In the Philippines, the Republic Act No. 8047, also known as the Book Publishing Industry Development Act, promotes the "continuing development of the book publishing industry… to ensure an adequate supply of… quality produced books." If textbooks possess such a powerful impact in the educational system, constant evaluation on their pedagogical use must be considered. textbook evaluations have ventured into specific perspectives such as intercultural competence, merits and demerits (Bahri & Agustina, 2023), balanced development of the macro skills (Celik, 2024), general attributes and learning–teaching content (Zulfiqar et al., 2023), authenticity (Newman & Hughes, 2024) among others. These studies only pertain to content evaluation of learning materials, that is, assessing "the worth and efficiency of particular textbooks in transmitting identifiable skills, knowledge and competencies" (Suzanne de Castell, 1989, as cited by Tao, 2024).

Critical pedagogy distances itself from traditional and teacher–centered views about education; that is, it favors a student– centered and more progressive approach about teaching–learning experiences. Specifically, critical educators promote teacher empowerment. They see teachers as intellectuals, critical thinkers, and catalysts of change rather than deskilled professionals who simply follow curricular orders and decisions without questioning the authority objectively (Askari & Baumgartner, 2024). Lamsal (2024) argued that "a curriculum that avoids questioning school and society is not, as is commonly supposed, politically neutral. It [curriculum] cuts off the students' development as critical thinkers about their world." A teacher's reflection then suggests that his or her involvement in the curriculum and critical examination of how language, ideology, and power are constructed in textbooks or any supplementary materials play a vital role to the holistic development of a student. Also, discussion of language, ideology, and power in this study is situated on the context of ESL textbook discourse, specifically on the Oral Communication instruction. Any form of communication which uses language possibly conveys ideology and power. Commercial textbooks in printed forms are not excused from being a subject of critical discourse analysis, that is, an examination of textbooks is an analysis of language and ideology. Jamaati et al. (2024) argued that these analyses can only be realized in relation to one another.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a cross–discipline which emerged in the early 1990s by distinguished researchers such as Theo van Leeuwen, Gunther Kress, Teun van Dijk, and Norman Fairclough (Sengul, 2024). At the conception of the discipline, theories and methods of CDA have been formulated to differentiate this paradigm from other theories and methodologies in Discourse Analysis (DA). Later on, the term has been known under many designations. Some scholars consider the concept as Critical Linguistics (CL) while others prefer the term Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). The difference in this conception makes CDA an interdisciplinary approach appropriate in investigating social problems occurring in different contexts such as history, business, education, laws, constitutions, politics, etc.

Fairclough's (2001), as cited in Zulfadhli (2024) three–stage model of Critical Discourse Analysis is similar to Halliday's functional analysis in some respects. It also considers discourse as a text (spoken or written, including visual images), a discourse practice production, consumption and distribution of the text, and a sociocultural practice. The three- dimensional framework analyzes text and discourse according to (a) the linguistic description of the formal properties of the text; (b) the interpretation of the relationship between the discursive processes/interaction and the text, and finally, (c) the explanation of the relationship between discourse and social and cultural reality. Fairclough contended that there are some underlying assumptions behind certain selections of discourse. These assumptions are never value-free and innocent; rather they are ideologically driven and motivated. Therefore, discursive practices may have ideological effects since they can produce and reproduce unequal power relations between social classes, gender groups and ethnic and cultural majorities and minorities through the ways they represent things and position people.

The sociocultural approach, founded by Lev Vygotsky, places a strong emphasis on social interactions and cultural contexts in cognitive development, it looks at language as a dynamic tool that facilitates meaning- making and identity construction within specific social environments. By being aware of how people interact in their cultural life, researchers can further analyze how discourse relates to and shapes social realities, which is one of the principles practiced by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Riyanti, 2024). Critical Discourse Analysis extends the sociocultural orientation in analyzing the relationship of language with power and society. For example, research by Norman Fairclough shows how discourse practices maintain social practices or change them and thereby influence individual behaviors and attitudes (Tyshakova, 2024). Classroom discourse can be shown to affect students' motivation and identity- building as highlighted by research into the MATATAG Curriculum that focuses on cultural responsiveness and social interaction while learning (Estrallado, 2023).

The Social Identity Theory (SIT) was developed by two scholars, Henri Tajfel and John Turner. This theory states that people derive their sense of identity from the various social groups they belong to and these define much of their behavior and attitudes towards other people. This approach hinges on the processes of classification, identification, and social comparison, whereby individuals classify themselves and others into various categories based on common features like race, gender, or nationality. Recent studies have expanded on SIT to explore how social identities are constructed and negotiated through discourse in various contexts, highlighting the dynamic nature of identity formation in contemporary society (Jiaozi, 2024).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) affords an important framework toward analyzing how words shape and represent social identities within power dynamics. While discourse practice is subject to analysis, CDA reveals that language not only reflects the structures of society but participates in the construction and strengthening of those very structures. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, as exemplified in his 2023 work, sheds light on how discourse reinforces in-group perspectives while marginalizing out-group positions, thereby shaping societal perceptions and influencing intergroup relations. This interplay between language and identity is essential for understanding how social identities are actually developed and sustained in particular settings.

Methodology

Research Design

Descriptive–qualitative study made use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to identify implicit assumptions in the ESL textbook discourse. The analysis examined the ideologies and assumptions embedded in discourse, linking them to diverse worldviews, experiences, and beliefs (Clark, 1995, as cited by Guinoubi, 2024). Moreover, the discourse project was interpretative. The analysis of the qualitative data involved open coding, axial coding, and selective coding as parts of the stages of CDA in extracting themes or assumptions.

Corpus of the Study

The texts that were analyzed are the three– paragraph front and back cover labeled as Text 1, the four–paragraph preface as Text 2, and five–paragraph Unit 1 Introduction as Text 3 of the DIWA LEARNING SYSTEMS INC's Oral Communication in Context, a 182–page textbook which is part of the DIWA Senior High School Series that are used in some private schools in Valencia City, Bukidnon.

Sampling

Convenient sampling was used in the selection of the set of materials. Online access to supplementary activities was also easy because the references are provided in the TSM.

Instrument

Stage 1 (Description) involves examining the vocabulary, grammar, and textual structures of the extracts. Stage 2 (Interpretation) focuses on the relationship between text and interaction by referring to the data analyzed in Stage 1. This led to the interpretation of the construction, reproduction, and transformation of social practices. The final stage, Stage 3 (Explanation), reveals the interaction between discourse and relations of power and discourse and evidence of struggle.

Data Collection

Close reading was a suitable approach for identifying texts centered on the theme of students. These sections were analyzed using the

three stages of Fairclough's (2001) critical discourse analysis model, as cited by Zulfadhli (2024), with the analysis guided by the research question.

Results and Discussion

Stage 1 or the Description Stage elaborated how the student is positioned in the discourse. The textbook producer or author is established as the agent "guiding" the student on what to learn and how to learn.

Student as Subordinate and Information Recipient

The research discussion explores the concept of agency within educational contexts, particularly focusing on the roles of authors and textbooks in shaping student communication skills.

In Text 1, the textbook establishes a sense of shared agency with the student by using the inclusive pronoun "we," suggesting a collaborative relationship. However, the subsequent distinction between competent and incompetent speakers introduces a hierarchical perspective that does not diminish the initial shared agency.

The agency then shifts to the textbook, which is described as actively engaging in the student's development through various actions like "provides" and "equips" 1.

Text 2 continues this theme, where both the author and the textbook assume agency. The author "provides" essential information about the K to 12 Program, while further orienting students to course expectations. The textbook takes a more dominant role in highlighting content and activities that involve real-life applications, indicating its authority in guiding student learning 2.

In Text 3, agency remains with both the author and textbook, with the author setting high expectations for student communicators. The textbook specifies lessons and focuses on practical communication situations, reinforcing its role as an authoritative guide 3. Throughout these texts, students are consistently addressed as "you," emphasizing their engagement but also positioning them as recipients of knowledge rather than active creators.

The analysis reveals a structured relationship where the textbook acts as an authoritative source of information and instruction, while students are seen as subordinates who receive guidance. Despite this, students are also conceptualized as needing holistic training in communication skills, indicating a dual role where they are both learners and potential communicators 45.

Overall, the discussion highlights how agency is constructed through language and structure in educational materials, reflecting broader themes of empowerment and authority within learning environments.

A Student is a Gifted or an Inept Speaker who needs Training

The research explores the concept of students as social beings and communicators, asserting that every student possesses an innate ability to communicate. This idea is reinforced through various terms such as communication, oral speakers, and effective communicator, highlighting the importance of communication skills in education. The author acknowledges a spectrum of communication abilities among students, noting that while some are naturally gifted speakers, others require development in their oral communication skills. This distinction emphasizes that there are both competent and less competent speakers, suggesting a need for tailored training to enhance these skills.

The research further advocates for a holistic approach to developing effective oral communication and 21st-century skills. It identifies five instructional strategies— discovery, integration, reflection, inquiry, and collaboration—that can facilitate comprehensive training. These methods are linked to hands-on activities such as research and project-based learning, which are essential for fostering effective communication.

Additionally, the study presents four perspectives on students: They must meet high expectations. Articulate students excel in various contexts. Students should have clear goals.

Engagement in personal and academic growth is crucial. This multifaceted view underscores the necessity of nurturing communication skills within educational frameworks to prepare students for future challenges.

A Student is Set Up with High Expectations that Need to be Met

Paragraph 1 provides the legal and pedagogical background the learner is in. The way the author promotes the aim of the Republic Act No. 10533 – holistic development of the students both in academic learning and… in life skills that can propel them to become successful, career–driven and passionate individuals – establishes the expectations that a student is expected to meet. The author's adherence to the Department of Education's 4 Exits (Higher Education, Employment, Entrepreneurship, and Middle–level Skill Development) as explicitly stated in Sentence 2–Paragraph 2: Whether you intend to pursue higher education or to be part of the country's workforce… and the extensive use of keywords higher education, workforce, opportunities, home, work, school, and community to construct the places or destination a student is expected to attend to or work for reinforce the view that a student is set up with 'constitutionalized' expectations.

An Articulate Student Stands Out in Different Contexts or Situations

The textbook highlights the importance of effective oral communication skills in distinguishing students in various contexts. In Sentence 2 of Paragraph 2, the assertion that strong communication abilities can open up better opportunities emphasizes the value of being articulate. The use of synonyms like "effective" and "impressive" to describe these skills, along with the interconnected concepts of communication, interaction, higher education, workforce, and community, reinforces the idea of a competitive and adaptable learner. This perspective suggests that students who excel in communication are better equipped to navigate diverse situations and achieve success.

A Student is an Apt Individual who has a Predefined Goal

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A Student Should be Involved in His or Her Development or Growth

Text 3 shares views of a student similar to those of Texts 1 and 2: (1) a student is set up with high expectations that he or she needs to meet, (2) a student is an active and 'learned' individual, and (3) a student is a responsible learner and must be involved in his or her learning. In addition, (4) a student should become a competent communicator or speaker and (5) a student needs proper guidance; that is, he or she is 'literate' but has the tendency to become insensitive, disrespectful, and inconsiderate.

A Student is Set Up with High Expectations that Need to be Met

The ideologically contested words and phrases such as future professional, skilled, and competent… communicator who will engage in both formal and informal interactions, build rapport and connection with different people, express… clearly and effectively, interact appropriately, and foster personal and professional growth as well as individual and communal progress describe the personage the student is expected to become in relation to the Department of Education's 4 Exits as suggested in Text 2. The rewording or overwording of the adverbs clearly, effectively, appropriately, efficiently, and always which describe the actions the student should/can/must do as in express yourself [clearly and effectively], interact [appropriately], use… [efficiently and appropriately], and [always] show also stresses these high expectations and/or how these expectations are to be accomplished.

A Student is an Active and 'Learned' Individual

The notion created in the use of the words interactions, rapport, connections, field, express, interact, personal and professional growth, and institution in Paragraphs 1, 2 and 3 deliberately emphasizes the 'activities' that students participate and will engage in… daily life. The 'participation' and 'engagement' in these activities require knowledge, skills, effort and willingness making the student an active individual. The markedly informal 3Ws in Sentence 2–Paragraph 3 – when, where, and who (with whom) – refer to the principles in oral communication that the student needs to internalize: the time, the place, and the interlocutor involved to use specific language efficiently and appropriately.

A Student Should Become a Competent Communicator

As for the second assumption in Text 3, the 'participation' and 'engagement' in these activities – interactions, rapport, connections, field, personal and professional growth, and institution – require knowledge, skills, effort and willingness making the student an active individual. Interchangeably, the 'requirement' of knowledge, skills, effort and willingness in the 'participation' and 'engagement' in these activities implies that a student should become a competent communicator or speaker. The analysis of the expectations presented above also supports this claim.

A Student is a Responsible Learner

The positive construction of sentences (except Sentence 3–Paragraph 3) and word choice which indicate the author's outlook of a learner (able to meet expectations) also shows his confidence that a student is responsible. In other words, a student who can meet standards is responsible. Similar to the assumption reflected in Text 2, the agents' constant acknowledgment of the student through the pronoun you (even if the discussion revolves on the textbook's structuring of lessons) positions him or her as an individual who is responsible for his or her learning.

A Student Needs Proper Guidance

The text discusses the role of language and communication skills in student development, emphasizing the need for effective and appropriate use of language. In Sentence 2 of Paragraph 3, the adverbs "efficiently" and "appropriately" remind students of the importance of specific language usage. However, the textbook introduces contested terms like "knowledge" and "skills," suggesting that while confidence is essential, students still have much to learn to become competent speakers, as indicated by a negative statement

in Sentence 3 of Paragraph 3. The informal tone in Sentence 1 of Paragraph 3 highlights that language encompasses more than mere speaking. The imperative statements in Sentences 4 and 5 serve as a warning about the tendency of modern students to be "insensitive," "disrespectful," and "inconsiderate," underscoring the need for proper guidance. In Stage 3 (Explanation), the text is re-examined through the lens of power dynamics at situational, institutional, and societal levels. At the situational level, classroom discourse reflects power relations between instructors and students. At the institutional level, it involves interactions among faculty, academic coordinators, and administration. At the societal level, power dynamics include larger governing bodies such as educational departments and textbook publishers. Overall, the discourse presented in various sections of the textbook reinforces existing power structures and positions itself as an authoritative guide for Senior High School oral communication instruction. It aims to equip students with effective communication skills and 21st-century competencies while acknowledging the influence of various educational stakeholders on this process.

Conclusions

The following conclusions were drawn, given the analysis that the author and the textbook assume an authoritative role over the student in the delivery of the text, the textbook discourse constructs unequal power relations between the author and the student; the student is positioned as subordinate and receiver of information, advices, instruction and direction; despite the unequal power relations between the textbook producers and students, the discourse constructs positive beliefs and assumptions about the students; the 21st century student is conceptualized as a socially active and responsible individual capable of meeting standards and excelling in different situations; the student must become a competent communicator but must be given holistic training and proper guidance as he or she has the tendency to become insensitive, disrespectful, and inconsiderate to others; and if the discourse is accepted as an authority, then this would contribute to sustaining the notion of textbook producer authority.

Based on the limitations and conclusion of the study, the following recommendations were drawn: the textbook may be used by the teachers as aid in the classroom instruction because of its positive view towards the student; the validity and reliability of the result may be objectively checked by experts or critical discourse analysts; the position and conceptualization of the teachers in the ESL textbook discourse may be studied; other sections of the textbook such as the modular discussion, formative assessment, culminating output and other relevant parts may be included in the analysis; the Teacher's Strategy Map may be included as the series comes as a set of student textbook and teacher's manual; and teachers are encouraged to evaluate textbooks with a CDA point of view.

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