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MANIFESTATION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY(S) IN AN IRANIAN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LITERACY CLASSROOM: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

English language Literacy education has recently focused attention on cultural identity(s). In these studies, cultural identities are defined as a significant "source of meaning and experience" constructed by and connected to the social context of the external world. More precisely, cultural identities are constructed by increasingly complexities of what construct literacy and multi literate practices in 21 century as a constantly changing socially and culturally diverse, globalized and technological era. This view can open a new horizon to English language literacy education in the new era which is supposed to go beyond merely 4-skill dominant pedagogical orthodoxy. The current study as a qualitative case study framed in New London Group focuses on how literacy practices and consequently cultural identities are constructed in an Iranian EFL classroom. To do so, we applied a critical classroom discourse analysis as the main technique of data collection. Results of this study can enrich the research literature in new literacy studies in which EFL contexts are still less visible.

Keywords: New London Group, multi literate Person, Stereotyped Cultural Identity Construction

INTRODUCTION

Education has recently focused attention on cultural identity(s). In these studies, cultural identity(s) are defined as a significant "source of meaning and experience" constructed by and connected to the cultural context of the external world (Norton, B. 1995; Norton, B. & Toohey, K. 2004). More precisely, cultural identity(s) is constructed by increasingly complexities of what construct literacy and multiliterate practices in 21 century as a constantly changing socially and culturally diverse, globalized and technological era.

Likewise, the literature (Norton 1995; Moje.et.al 2007) has shown that cultural identity is linked to literacy development. Many researchers emphasized on this point that students' cultural identities should be more valued in the classroom in order to increase participation and success for marginalized groups of students. (Norton, B. & Toohey, K. 2004). However, English language and literacy in EFL contexts like Iran do not address this issue and tend to side step the

question of language and literacy development following traditional stereotyped cultural approaches centered on the expense of learners' identity turn and negotiation. In fact, these classes have still remained fixed in a decontextualized conception of literacy which is an essentialized culture. As such, modes of meaning making of western culture are romanticised as a main path determiner in ELT which seemingly cannot situate learners' sociocultural needs and identities in the heart of these classes. Such a context seems to be a continuation of neocolonizing discourse of the new era and has led to enormous inequalities in the education system for the majority of learners. This ignorance has recently been challenged by New Literacy Studies with the perspective of education.

This paper first gives a brief overview of theoretical dimensions of multiliteracies pedagogy and then depict a vignette on how to situate learners' cultural identity in the Iranian classroom discourse to highlight the potential risk of such a construction which cannot lead to achieving a multiliterate person in 21st century in which there are a multi-layered interaction of various cultures when it is just centred on a stereotyped English speaking culture as common in Iran**.**

THEORETICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In response to concern about how literacy education can equip learners for the ever increasing changing world to become multiliterate persons aimed at catering for today' needs, in the "1996" Spring, ten celebrated scholars in language and literacy gathered together and published an article in which the term " multiliteracies" was originated. The article, entitled, 'A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies' (New London Group 1996; Cope and Kalantzis 2000) highlighted a pedagogic framework specific aimed at rethinking the future of literacy and language education in the context where we witness main cultural changes: a rapidly changing English language, the globalisation of communication and labour markets, extraordinary technological change, linguistic and cultural diversity, and novel forms of global citizenship (Cope and Kalantzis, ibid). Hence, It has been taken up by many scholars in order to challenge the idea of a singular, universal literacy restricted to monocultural and rule-governed standard forms of language (Gee1997; Street1993). As a consequence, New London Group (2000:35) proposed a Pedagogy of "Multiliteracies" reflecting their assumption that the human mind is essentially cultural. They argued for a Pedagogy integrated with four following elements:

(1) Situated Practice: A student's immersion into meaningful process within a community of learners who are capable of playing multiple and different roles based on previous and current experiences. Situated practice must consider the socio-cultural needs and identities of all learners.

(2) Overt Instruction: A teacher's intervention into the meaning-making process by scaffolding learning activities. Students gain explicit and clear information to organize and guide their learning. The goal of overt instruction is to develop a student's conscious awareness and control over what is being learned.

(3) Critical Framing in which learners constructively critique and extend their learning as starting point for transformed practice.

(4) Transformed Practice: A teacher can develop new ways in which students can demonstrate how they can design and carry out new practices embedded in their goals and values. Transformed practice allows students to meaningfully apply and critically revise what they have learned.

The New London Group (2000) indicated that the four components of the Pedagogy do not necessarily form in a linear fashion, nor do they refer to stages. Rather, elements of each may occur simultaneously, while at different times one or the other will predominate, and all of them are repeatedly revisited at different levels. Moreover, each of them represents a tradition in pedagogy in general and literacy teaching in particular, some of which sit in direct opposition to each other and were developed to replace prevailing orthodoxies (Kalantiz & Cope, 2000).

RESEARCH QUESTION

Based on the concepts of cultural modes of meaning making introduced "Multiliteracies" pedagogy, this study examines the question that how the teacher's classroom literacy practices construct cultural identity in an IELI classroom.

Research Methodology

This study was developed over the course of approximately one semester (three months) in 2011 situated in an Iranian English language Institute (IELI) classroom in a city in western north part of Iran. The methodology followed a qualitative case study model (Creswell, 2008) utilizing a variety of data collection methods specifically , the main researcher: a) made bi-weekly visits to the class and documented the classroom discourses using an observation protocol in line with multiliteraies approach of New London Group ; b) was an -observer in the classroom without any intervention, audio taping recording classroom discussions and activities; c) took some observational field notes d) conducted follow-up interviews with participants.

The principles underpinning this methodology focused on providing description of how an EFL teacher's literacy practices construct cultural identity. Whilst there exists a large number of

ways in order to obtain transcription and analysis of the data, in such research classroom observation as the main tool to collect data were subjected to Critical discourse analysis of Bloome, Carter, Christian, Ottoand, Shuart- Faris(2005). As such, It was a technique applied to analysing transcribed observational data which here cover the manifestation of participants' cultural identities. The main reason for choosing this approach, as Street points out in the preface of Bloome et al.' Book, is due to the capability of this frame in making a close link between their analysis of linguistic features of socio- cultural interaction with what Gee (1997) calls the "social turn" in language study that ranges from the social and cultural nature of identity (i.e. the construction of identity is culturally, socially determined), power relations in classroom events, to the role of multiple literacies, which are important topics in discussions on literacy and multiliteracies pedagogy.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Teacher's Background Knowledge around English Language Literacy

Like all teachers, Majid's background knowledge base includes personal and professional experiences. Majid is 31 years, married, born in the same city in Iran where one of the researchers grew up and was familiar with the social, cultural context. He grew up in middle social class family, he is Muslim and his first language is Persian. Majid's English language literacy learning began when he was in high school in a rather traditional way of textbook –oriented. When he realized he could not speak or understand English language very well, he decided to watch Hollywood movies and Cartoons that he labeled as his main entertainment until now so that he is now really into American culture.

> *I am really into American culture, their accents, their movies, cartoons .perhaps this is why my friends sometimes call me "film geek". It can be said it is the only entertainment I have. (Interview 2 March 2011)*

His addiction to watch Hollywood movies brought about a tangible new identity in his various modes of meaning making in all his communication layers from style of dressing to behaving in his classroom interactions. These communication modes are not completely in line with the regional and national cultural norms of his learners. For instance, he addresses his learners in class with a western nicknames (not very common in Iran) hoping that making what he labels as a *real English* in his class although some learners in his class don't not like this . (Field notes 18 April 2011). 5.2. A Critical Discourse Analysis of an Interactional Segment in an English Language Classroom

Majid's class in this semester started twice at week at 6: 30 PM, March, 2012. The main researcher sat waiting for starting the first session of the class. All of the sudden, the main

researcher' eyes were captured by an computer covered on just teachers' desk and a blackboard obsessed with mathematics equation and some pictures unrelated to an English Language classroom. The students' benches were ordered in two rows in a 7- linear form so that

teacher's position was in front of class and learners were behind each other. It seemed as if the researcher came in a classroom discourse with traditional mode of meaning-making in which the teacher is the authority, such a kind of classroom arrangement induces this idea which possibly this class is not dialogical oriented and the superior knowledge and power of the teacher is of significance (Freier, 1972 ; Aghaei, et al 2012).

As observed, Majid's practices were influenced by the prescribed foreign textbook on ELI classroom discourse. He was obliged to cover four thematically organized units in this current semester as he mentioned in his interview. So a structural analysis of lessens depicted that he had a set of routine activities. He began every session with a warm-up activity titled "Snapshot" which typically includes 2 or 3 overarching questions about content of units. Then learners were to respond to the questions. His practices were followed by the following predictable patterns namely Conversation, Grammar focus, Pronunciation, Listening, Speaking, Word power. In practice, mostly he focused on speaking and listening as decontextualized skills. Regarding how to cover the structural analysis of his way of performing, he often followed a monologue pattern and centred on restricted designs mostly linguistic design/ mode. The following vignette is typical of student –teacher exchange in the classroom:

> *Teacher: ok Betty, are you ready(Betty was a selected nickname by the teacher for addressing Zahra) Betty: Yes, "Who is Ang Lee? He is a movie director. He made the film Hulk. (She started reading the textbook's example loudly. Then she asked teacher with confusion) By the way, **what** is Hulk? (Classroom observation, March 2011)*

The above excerpt indicates that the way of teaching in this class is based on a set of teacher's cultural presuppositions some of which are influenced by the foreign textbook. He addresses his learners with a foreign nickname such as Betty; Angelina, etc. That is a naturalized practice in his class. In fact, he holds the view that choosing new name can assume a new identity in line with so-called native speakers. In his view, this can enhance his learners' feelings of security and allow them to be more expressive. In addition, the application of *"what"* by Betty reflects her unfamiliarity and confusion with such a movie exemplified in the textbook as another dominant cultural meaning making tool. Teacher here can adapt this practice based on the local cultural knowledge of the learners by introducing some well-known and familiar local movie characters rather than merely resorting to a textbook stereotyping a cultural knowledge. Such adaptation can make learners come to the center of the class. Let us turn to the previous scenario of teacher– learner exchanges in the classroom.

> *Betty: He is a movie director (she pronounces [director] in Persian English accent)*

Teacher: no, no, director with two pronunciations. One is British, your favorite accent against American, my favorite accent.

Here, how to pronounce the word "director" by Betty stigmatized as Persian English reflects Iranian socio - cultural ways of being norms, beliefs and practices, however, teacher views it as corruption in learner's language and reacts directly through correcting learner's pronunciation and pointing out we just have two accepted models for English language. This is a belief embedded in cognitive school of thought he was trained. Although he corrected his learner, he wasn't able to make learner critically aware of the realities and differences between Standard English and Persian English as a variety of world Englishes which is representative of national cultural identity of Iranian learner and their different functions. In fact, his way of doing in a society where teacher is identified as a sacred pattern for learners cannot transform them to respect for their own cultural capital and others. In his justification of this way of teaching, he mentions in one of his interviews:

> *Since English doesn't belong to us, we should be very careful not to separate it from its native speaker's culture I mean American or British culture. Therefore, one of the teacher's responsibilities is to represent information about that culture. You know, culture is not only literature and the arts, but also the everyday behavior of people to whom English do really belong to. (interview, 30 March 2011)*

Referring to his learners' voices, we can hear some of his learners' complains from here and there. For instance,they hate to be addressed with foreign names and recall that:

> We *have rich history, we learn English to voice to the world. Why should we take their name, we think our names are beautiful. When I am addressed with a foreign name in the class by teacher, I feel should play another role but I wanna learn English to be myself not a different one.(Interview, 10 April 2011)*

Likewise, learners don't like their class's space to be obsessed with topics which are socio -culturally strange. One of his learners in a private conversion with the main researcher told that:

> *How can teacher expect me to speak and express my mind about the movie I have never watched? other learner also said:It seems as if our teacher does not know we have a lot of national and local movies which won many international prizes. That is not better to focus on them rather than just centering on many unfamiliar movies".* *(Interview, 15 March 2011)*

Concluding Remarks

The critical discourse analysis presented above indicates some challenges and discontinuities of how to construct of teacher' literacy practices with the realities of learners' cultural identities in this classroom discourses. In fact, the teacher's literacy practices doesn't introduce and unpack a conscious awareness on learners' cultural identity(s).

In addition teacher doesn't follow the elements of critical framing to make learners capable of constructively critic and extend their learning as a starting point for the next element of pedagogy of multiliteracies i.e. transformed practice. He chases a discourse which romanticizes different cultural values with those of learners'. This way of teaching may make a bifurcation among learners and teachers , a kind of marginalization for learners who are needed to know how to be critical for living in the 21 century we are needed to have an interaction among various cultures.(Cope & Kalantzis, 2000)

Educators should be recognizant that literacy should involves individual and collective identities what is local can be negotiated with the global in a critically situated manner .This negotiation and representation of local knowledge with global, of course critically can hold possibilities for the more sustained learning. According to Norton (2010), Literacy practices construct and are constructed by identities. This statement can pose that there is reciprocal relationship between literacy and identity. Importantly, there is pressing need for us to consider more critically what constitutes English literacy, ways of being in being plural, doing plurality and meaningful ways of learning. It requires us to find out the plural ways of being; identities and literacies are expected in 21st century when multiliteracies and cultural differences become a way of life. It also necessitates the new ways of negotiation, dialogue around cultural differences and trying to find the ways of establishing common grounds in the way of difference (Koo, 2008).

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