

Power Struggle in a Female Group Discussion: The Case of a Ghanaian University

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Abstract

In almost all group discussions among learners, language serves as a medium through social interaction is promoted and learning is maximised. However, when restraint is compromised by participants in a discussion, an atmosphere is created for power struggles among them. Thus, the present paper takes a particularist view at the phenomenal use of interruptions in the group discussion of four female students in a Ghanaian university, and how the interruptions express the members' quest for power, dominance and authority. The data constitutes a thirty minute live recording of the discussion, and was analysed within the framework of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and Fairclough's (1995; 2001) concept of power. Key findings show that in a small group discussion, it is the more powerful students that enact power in order to (a) ensure that untenable contributions are minimised, (b) supply reliable information, and (c) keep the discussion on track. These findings bear implications for critical discourse studies and pedagogy.

Keywords: Interruption, Zone of Proximal Development, Power, Learner

Introduction

Language is a material medium through which social interaction is fostered. In higher institutions of learning, interactive discourse promotes collaborative learning among learners especially during small group discussions. Quite apart from setting the stage for an in-depth grasp of a subject matter, group discussions sharpen students' communicative skills and promote their human relations (Jaramillo, 1996; Hasan, 2002). Over the years, a large body of work in the second language teaching and learning environment has explored how power is enacted, manifested and contested among learners and sometimes in relation to their instructors (e.g. Orellana, 1996; Cohen, 1997; Barnes, 2005). Power here may be viewed as the ability of a person to influence the action of another in the pursuit of the will and goals of the former (Abercrombie & Turner, 1988). It is normally asymmetrical (Brown & Gillman, 1960; Fairclough, 2001). Some studies have also examined the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of group discussions (e.g. Foster & Taylor, 1999). Given this terrain of previous scholarship, the discursive function of interruptions in learners' group discussions has largely been under-researched.

Thus in this paper, I explore how power is enacted and contested among four female undergraduate students in a Ghanaian university during a group discussion, focusing on how they interrupted one another. Specifically, the paper aims at answering the following questions:

1. In what ways do female students use interruptions to enact power in a group discussion?
2. Why do female students interrupt one another in a group discussion?

Conceptual background

This section reviews some empirical studies on power asymmetry in the teaching and learning context. The review of the literature is then followed by the theoretical framework.

Review of Previous Scholarship

Discourse studies on group learning, particularly in the context of second language acquisition, have been conducted in many cultures. While some have focused on learners themselves and how they negotiate, enact and struggle for power in the learning process, others have examined this phenomenon with respect to how learners position themselves in relation to their teachers' authority.

Myers and Bishop (1970) investigated the effects of discussions on racial attitudes in three Michigan high schools. The authors found that discussion enhances dominant group values, leading to increased polarisation between homogeneously composed groups of high-, medium-, and low-prejudice high school subjects. With the aid of statistical tools, Myers and Bishop observed that members in the experimental group made individual attitude judgement, discussed them and remade judgements. Those in the control group, on the other hand, discussed irrelevant materials before responding again to the attitude items. Myers and Bishop concluded that discussions with similar others significantly increased the gap between high- and low- prejudice subjects.

Orellana (1996) also examined two-problem-posing meetings in a bilingual elementary school in California. The study explored various means by which both the instructor and learners enacted and negotiated power. Orellana found that students engaged in a struggle for dominance in the absence of their teacher. Regardless of the teacher's participation in the discussion, they still continued in their power struggle, but this time the teacher controlled the interaction by asserting her own opinions and dictating the pace. She also monitored students' contributions and corrected misinterpretations.

Like Orellana (1996), Cohen (1997) studied the sources and consequences of status problems in heterogeneous classrooms. The author realised that inequality in status is a cause of unequal interactions within groups. Her study reveals that factors that determine a student's status include the ability to be perceived, popularity with peers as well as gender, social class and ethnicity. Tamakloe and Amadehe (2005) write that some students feel unequal to their peers in group discussions due to stage fright, inability to articulate and shyness. The co-authors further cite low achievement and lack of knowledge of subject matter as other causes. For Tamakloe and Amadehe (2005), group discussions thrive in an atmosphere where there is freedom of speech which is guided by respect for the views of other members, and patience to wait for others who are making their contributions to the discussion. The reason is that when restraint is compromised, some members "exceed their bounds and become irresponsible in their utterances" (Tamakloe & Amadehe, 2005: 338).

In a similar study, Barnes (2005) explored the unfolding of power in a small group discussion of four Mathematics high school students. The study focused on how more powerful or high status students control the topics of a discussion. The analysis reveals that seldom does any group achieve a completely balanced pattern, with each member speaking exactly the same amount of time as every other member. This dialogical imbalance, Barnes believes, is a breeding ground for power struggle and the desire to dominate and/or lead the discussion. The author adds that the frequency of interruptions by a member in the group is an indication of the level of power they wield. Even though group discussions serve as a platform for the sharing of ideas (Hipple, 1973), the study shows that only high status students dominate the discussion through a careful display of their academic ability. Barnes (2005) concludes that her study "will help in planning instructional strategies designed to reduce inequities in the classroom and enhance learning for all students" (p. 144).

In Ghana, Owusu-Ansah (1992) examined how student leaders in the University of Cape Coast employ modality to enact power in their interaction with the central administration. The author analysed written minutes of meetings and resolution documents produced by the student leaders. Owusu-Ansah found that while students employed modality in the minutes of meetings to show politeness and powerlessness, in the resolution documents they displayed a high degree of power in their demands. The author notes that this difference is due to the variation in context and the nature of interaction.

Finally, Gborsong (2001) analysed gender power relations in informal conversations between teachers and students in three senior high schools in the Cape Coast metropolis. The results of his study showed that whereas gender plays an insignificant role among teachers, the opposite is the case when teachers and students interact. According to Gborsong, when male and female teachers interact, any of the genders can dominate the conversation. He also found that when teachers converse

with students, the gender of the student as well as that of the teacher influences the use of language in the conversation.

In brief, the review brings to light two important facts. In the first place, critical discourse studies of interruptions in Ghana are lacking. Secondly, there is little knowledge of power dynamics in small group discussions in Ghana. To fill this gap, the present paper examines how power is enacted and contested in a seemingly symmetrically homogeneous group of four female university students.

Theoretical Lens

The study draws on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and Fairclough's (1995a; 2001) concept of power. The thrust of the sociocultural theory rests on the assumption that language is central to the cognitive and overall development of a learner, and that the language acquisition process is socially situated. Sociocultural tools such as symbols and gestures also enhance the learning process. For Vygotsky (1978), "all learning is inherently social resulting from the internalisation of processes developed in interactions with more able adults and peers" (p. 24). This learning process is what he termed "the zone of proximal development." Zone of proximal development refers to the difference between learners' capabilities to solve their own problems and their capabilities to solve them with assistance (Vygotsky, 1978: p. 86). In a group discussion, the scaffolding often comes from more informed learners.

Vygotskian scholars such as Berk (1994), Jaramillo (1996) and Barnes (2005) have argued that an essential feature of learning is that it awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the learner develops the habit of interacting and cooperating with others. Group discussions thus help learners to naturally internalise dialogues with others and use this information and language skills on other occasions as and when necessary (Hassan, 2002).

Similar to the sociocultural theory, Fairclough's concept of power is socially situated. According to Fairclough (1995a; 1995b), it is the most powerful participants in any social interaction that control the discourse, and in the process put constraints on the contributions of the less powerful. This power asymmetry is enacted, Fairclough (2001) holds, through the control of topic shifts, turn-taking, interruptions and taking decisions as to what should or not be accepted (See *also* Goodwin, 2002; Edu-Buandoh, 2006). The author posits that power relations are normally maintained as a result of the various discursive practices and ideologies contained in a given discourse. For instance, it is a common discursive practice in group discussions that a leader is selected so as to ensure that the discussion goes on unimpeded by distractions (Tamakloe & Amadehe, 2005). Yet, this inhibition results in power struggles.

In sum, these combined models—sociocultural theory and power—furnish us with the needed framework within which to explore how power is enacted in a small group discussion of four female students at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana.

Methodology

This section considers the research design, participants, data collection procedure and method of analysis.

The Research Design

The present study was rooted in the qualitative research paradigm. This type of research is concerned with how people make sense of their lives, experiences and their structures of the world (Cresswell, 1994). The goal of qualitative research, Altheide (1996) posits, "is to understand the process and character of social life and to arrive at meaning...types, characteristics, and organisational aspects of documents as social products in their own right, as well as what they claim to represent" (p. 42). Altheide (1996) adds that grounding the assessment of the social world in a qualitatively oriented research helps to preserve the processual character of social life. Punch (1998) also sees qualitative analysis as essential for undertaking research of field or life situations that are reflective of everyday life, groups, societies and organisations.

This view is particularly true of the present study in that the researcher was interested in analysing how power is enacted in the discourse of four female university students during a group discussion. Thus, by employing the qualitative design, the present researcher aimed at giving a detailed account of how members of the group used interruptions to arrogate power, thereby controlling the pace of the discussion.

The Participants

The group was made up of four females namely Adjoa, Ama, Esi and Effe (original names withheld), all aged 20. They were second-year undergraduate students of Drama and Theatre at the University of Cape Coast (UCC), a Ghanaian public university established in 1962. Members of this group belong to one ethnolinguistic group, Akan, the most widely spoken Ghanaian language with over 60% of both natives and non-native speakers (Obeng, 1997; Nyarko, 2008). This information was obtained through an informal interview with members.

Female participants were selected for two main reasons. First, research on language and gender, notwithstanding counter arguments, has pointed to men's dominance and relative power over women, thereby expressing the idea that women's language is weak, deficit and without power (Lakoff, 1975; Litosseliti, 2006). Second, the study attempted to reduce the usual subjectivity that typifies qualitative research (Dawson, 2002; Payne & Payne, 2004). Given that the present researcher is a male, he did not want to be easily influenced by the bias, ideologies and ideosyncrasies of his gender.

Data Collection Procedure

The data upon which the present study is based was recorded upon negotiation of entry. The negotiation was done by explaining the rationale of the study to the group. Members were engaged in revising and discussing their Drama and Theatre lecture notes in preparations towards the forthcoming examinations. The recording machine was then handed over to the group leader whom I had instructed to do the actual recording after a time lapse of fifteen minutes so that the discussion could proceed as naturally as possible, free of any contrivance. The spoken text was then transcribed using French's (1992) level II longhand transcription method. The data constitute a thirty minute live recording of the group discussion at the Faculty of Arts, UCC.

Method of Analysis

The data was analysed based on Fairclough's (1995a; 2001) critical discourse analysis (CDA). As a tool, CDA examines the workings of power relations in texts. Fairclough models his methodology on three basic indices: description, interpretation and explanation. The author intimates that the analysis of a text needs to be interpreted in respect of the member resources (MR) available in the discourse which include background knowledge and ideology as well as his six domains of text interpretations (Fairclough, 1995). These include social orders, vocabulary, grammar and pragmatics.

Results and discussion

This section discusses the major findings of the study by considering the research questions.

Enacting Power through Interruptions

The analysis of the data shows that the group discussion was characterised by as many as sixty three (63) instances of interruptions and overlapping out of a total of eighty seven (87) turns. The table below shows the frequency and percentage of interruptions by each participant in the discussion.

Participant	Interruptions	Proportion (%)
Adjoa	22	34.9
Effe	18	28.6
Esi	13	20.6
Ama	10	15.9
Total	63	100.0

Table 1. Participant interruptions in a group discussion

The table above demonstrates the degree of dominance of Adjoa and Effe in the discussion. The distribution supports Flynn and Fasol's (1972) claim that seldom does any group achieve a completely balanced pattern with each member speaking for exactly the same amount of time (p. 3). The statistical analysis also agrees with Cohen's (1997) claim that it is the most powerful in the group that dictate the pace of the discussion, and it is they that admit which responses are to be accepted and those that should not. Available evidence from the data shows that it is Adjoa that poses as leader of the discussion; she is the one who determines the topic shifts, and dominates the group in order to ensure the optimal achievement of their goal. In the following extract, she calls Esi to order when the former feels that the latter is adding a point of no consequence.

Extract 1

- 023 Esi: . . . you get more vocabs to even go to the lowest level to make the students understand you. . . the more and even if you can't express it to them in English through your action they can understand//
- 025 Adjoa: This topic is answered. . . Let's go to another question. . .
- 027 Esi: But//
- 028 Adjoa: It's okay. . . the point is enough. . .
- 029 Esi: *Yeah it's enough but I've not finished answering the question. . .*
- 030 Adjoa: So the next question is. . .

In the above extract, it is clear that Adjoa more than once interrupts Esi in her contribution to the discussion. By ordering the group to move on to the next topic of interest, she not only dismisses Esi's contribution but also threatens her face in the process (Brown & Levinson, 1978). By so doing, she enacts her power on the entire group, and thus reminds the group that she is the one at the helm of affairs. Face threatened, Esi admits that fact and reluctantly responds in the affirmative. Notice that the italics indicate the low and faint tone with which she does that (see line 029). This tacit admission on Esi's part gives weight to Fairclough's (2001) claim that it is the most powerful member in the group that determines what is there to discuss.

In the second extract, the group members discuss the taxonomy of drama as pertains at the lower primary school level.

Extract 2

- 043 Esi: I think it it's only riddles because the folklore folklore. . . we have riddles as part of folklore . . . so I think with the lower primary (.) the type of story is the **anansesem**//
- 047 Ama: Folklore and rhymes and riddles and () they do those things//
- 049 Effe: poems those kind of things//
- 050 Esi: That is as a subject when you go to the lower//

This extract shows the lack of assertiveness and certainty in Esi's speech. She uses the hedge "I think" and repeats twice the indefinite singular pronoun *it* to express this uncertainty. Also, she pauses as many as three times in the course of her contribution. It is for this reason that she is interrupted by Ama. Esi nonetheless resists this dominance and contests for the group's attention when she eventually interrupts Effe, in an attempt to say that she, Esi, knows too well that folklore is learnt as a subject at the lower primary school level. The demonstration of her knowingness is evident in her emphatic stress of 'a subject' (line 050).

The struggle for power and dominance in the group's meeting further unfolds in the following extract.

Extract 3

- 091 Ama: Like how Ghanaaaa migrated from//
- 092 Effe: the er. . .old Ghana. . .
- 093 Ama: Sudan//
- 094 Effe: the old Ghana. . . it talks about the old Ghana//
- 094 Adjoa: The old Ghana. . . it talks about the old Ghana to our present Ghana...the historical moment so that

drama as a tool **no** it helps you to know how we learn so he said that dramatists have been quick to seize on size on historic events or personage to supply the subject matter of their place although the results have been without historical validity. . .

At this stage of the discussion, members engage one another's attention on the relevance of history to dramaturgy. Brainstorming is a common discursive practice of group discussions. It is clear that neither Ama nor Effe knows so well the facts off head about the old Ghana empire, its founder, or how it came into being no less than its application to the study of drama. On the contrary, Adjoa once again enacts her power over the group, this time through a careful display of her intellectual prowess. She explains to her friends that history is used as a tool in the hands of dramatists and playwrights to according to her to "supply the subject matter of their place" (line 035). Adjoa however reminds her colleagues that dramatists in most cases approximate their settings to achieve the desired dramaturgical effects.

Reasons Female Students Use Interruptions in Collaborative Learning

The analysis of the data reveals that the female participants interrupted one another for three major reasons. The interruptions served as (a) a medium for providing adequate responses, (b) a means of avoiding immaterial contributions, and (c) an indication of the group's attentiveness.

A Medium for Providing Immediate and Adequate Responses

The analysis shows that some members were keen at interrupting other selves in an attempt to provide not only what they felt were reliable but also immediate responses in instances where the discussion took a backward move. In the following extract, the dominant in the group interrupted less powerful members so as to supply brilliant insights to keep the discussion on track.

Extract 4

206 Effe: . . . in a dramatic instead of () . . . so the purpose of drama in school when used in education is not training and acting not the production and plays for audience and not for () appreciation of () . . . so it provides for a controlled emotional outlet. . . emotional release of//
210: Adjoa: But what a child a child sees he hears and reads are very important but what he does is more lively. . . what a child sees hears and reads are more important but what he does is likely to get over into his life. . . ha ha so when you asked as a tool you have to play role...
214 Ama: **Eda no musuaga ade bi** . . . () yesterday I was learning about//
215 Adjoa: Children learn by doing. . . drama provides them with the physical and concrete resources for examining issue which might not which may not ha ha. . .

From the interaction above, Adjoa once again dominates the group and thus controls the development of the discussion. Her intrusion in Esi's contribution is indicative of the fact that only meaningful responses are tolerated. This, according to Flynn and La Faso (1972) and Cohen (1997) is a violation of the discursive practices of group discussions. A second look at this interruption reveals that Adjoa notices that Effe is incapable of applying her knowledge of drama to the effects it wields on children.

Application, for educational psychologists such as Bloom (1956), is one of the highest mental learning orders. The ability of Adjoa to apply theatrical concepts therefore demonstrates that she is the most brilliant in the group. On the other hand, the mere recalling of fact or what Bloom (1956) terms "knowledge" is unprocessed information which for him does not make any intellectual difference. Yet, this is what Effe exhibits at this juncture. Rather, the ability to apply, analyse, and evaluate is what characterises a student as being intellectually endowed (Bloom, 1956). For example, it is Adjoa who meticulously maintains that "what a child sees, hears and reads is more important but what he does is likely to get over into his life" (lines 213-214). Here she directly applies the principle of learning by doing (Tamakloe & Amadehe, 2005).

Adjoa again interrupts Ama to round up her mini-lecture on the relationship between drama and child psychology. She tells the whole group that "drama provides them with the physical and concrete resources for examining issues" (lines 216-217). Evidently, it is this 'high status' (Barnes, 2005) that ac-

cords Adjoa the chance to exert power on the group as intimated earlier so as to enable the group to meet their academic objectives. Thus, according to Gee (1999; 2004) and Fairclough (2001), one's choice of words is not neutral but rather ideologically contested, and may be the cause of power asymmetry. Hence, when Adjoa says, "so when you asked as a tool you have to play role" (line 214), she in the process places herself over and above all her colleagues, and consequently asserts her position as leader of the group. Powerful participants in the group discussion also interrupted their colleagues so as to prevent them from making irrelevant contributions.

A Means of Avoiding Untenable Contributions

The data also shows that some members in the group used interruptions in order to avoid contributions they did not find tenable. The extract below is an example:

Extract 5

102 Esi: Let's take this one though () historical place we have some of the
 historical er. . . perspectives okay er. . .er. . . *The Marriage of Anansewa*. .
 . it's through *The Marriage of Anansewa* that we learn about the four homogeneous socie-
 ty... the chiefs they represented the er. . . Ghana before//
 107 Adjoa: He said the four ethnic belts. . .
 108 Esi: Yeah the four belts. . . even before aft I think it's independence right. .
 something () independence before we had the other four regions. . . so these four re-
 gions talks about Ghana in those days so at least it educates us a little on our
 history//
 112 Adjoa: Then let's see what was said today. . .
 113 Esi: what was said today. . .

In the above extract, Adjoa interrupts Esi so as to supply what Esi cannot quickly recollect. Realising that Esi seems to be digressing and making irrelevant contributions, she as leader of the group snaps in and reminds the whole group to consider "what was said today." This pragmatic order serves as an evaluative check against the tendency of deviating from the main issues, and is in conformity with the order of discourse of group learning. Having assessed the substance of Adjoa's caution and authority, Esi simply agrees and repeats the statement as an indication of truth. Adjoa's self assertiveness and dominance brings back to mind Vygotsky's (1978) and Orellana's (1996) claims that it is the more informed peers and/or adults that assist the weaker ones in any collaborative encounter. Lastly, interruptions are a pointer to the group's attentiveness.

An Indication of the Group's Attentiveness

Finally, the analysis reveals that the students interrupted one another as an indication of their poise, focus and attentiveness. Doing so enabled members to cooperate in the discussion. Available evidence further shows that even though interruptions sometimes retarded the development of the discussion, they were used by members to express their active involvement in the discourse. Such interruptions suggest that the members were all interested in the progress of the discussion since they sometimes did so to express their approval or otherwise of a point raised. The following extract captures this essence:

Extract 6

158 Effe: Let's take this seminar that I wanted us to go and join...for instance on their
 this thing they added role play//
 160 Adjoa:] They added role plays...
 161 Ama:] They added role plays...
 162 Esi:] Role plays...
 163 Ama: when I to () I will ask... when I went to ask that seminar they said//
 164 Adjoa: The flat
 rate was hundred thousand but this thing was seven hundred...
 166 Esi:] seven hundred
 167 Effe:] seven hundred so//
 169 Adjoa: Seminars
 professional they add role playso that the impact will be better ha ha...
 even if you will not remember anything the role tha was played...
 172 Effe: The role that was played//
 173 Adjoa: This means you also registered...

In their interaction of the value of role play in seminars, the participants' cooperation is clear in their interruptions of one another. Notice how Adjoa, Ama and Esi (160 to 162) emphasise the essence of role plays, a point first raised by Effe. It can therefore be said that the interruptions were not harmful or face-threatening but rather enhanced the progress of the discussion. The members in the process give their full support of Effe's contribution and therefore fully agree with her on that score. Another overlapping in the extract is seen in Esi's and Effe's confirmation the fee for the seminar was seven hundred thousand. Thus, sometimes when group members interrupted one another in their discussions, they did so not only to minimise distractions but also to generate interest in the discussions.

Conclusion

The paper has explored how members in a group discussion contested one another in their attempt to enact power over other members through the use of interruptions. A key finding of the study is that high status students interrupt the contributions of their peers in order to supply the most relevant, immediate, and adequate responses. The results further show that powerful participants interrupted others so as to prevent them from making untenable contributions, which in most cases stifle the progress of discussions in group discussions. Finally, the analysis reveals that the use of interruptions in group learning is indicative of the group's cooperation and attentiveness in the learning process.

The above findings bear a number of recommendations. First, it is recommended that further critical discourse studies be carried on the nature of the discourse of small group discussions. Such proposed studies will shed light on useful pedagogical implications for improving second language learning and general classroom practices. In view of both the distractive and effective role interruptions in small group discussions, it is important that further research be conducted in this direction. Finally, language teachers, language researchers and educationists are reminded to encourage collaborative learning not only among students of tertiary institutions but also at both the junior and senior high schools. The rationale is to empower them to be less dependent on their teachers, but rather learn to develop their language skills and human relations in order to maximise learning in an environment devoid of inhibition and intimidation from peers.

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