

# **The Hidden Dimension of Classrooms as Designed Spaces: A Multimodal Analysis of Iranian English-Learning Classrooms**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The study investigates the English-language classrooms in Iran as designed spaces. The analytical toolkit of this investigation consists of Multimodality Theory and Activity Theory. Actually, the study discusses how visual displays and spatial design of a classroom can shape the educational discourses, semiotic practices, and assessment tools. Drawing on three different English-learning classes as examples, the present research shows that the variations in findings are the result of the broader social and policy issues that frame the design of teaching environments. It is also found that an agentive teacher managed to challenge the authority of tradition thanks to teaching in a context that just belonged to her.*

**Key Words:** Multimodality, Activity Theory, English Classroom Design, Pedagogic Discourse

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Spaces and places are never neutral. They have the capacity to position people negatively or positively. In fact, spaces and places can "take on a symbolic significance around which identities are constituted and performed" (Hetherington 1998, p. 106). The importance of place and space in everyday life has captured the attention of many researchers lately. This 'spatial turn' is deeply rooted in poststructuralist and postmodern theory, drawing upon Foucault's (1986, p. 22) observation that human beings are presently living in an 'epoch of space'. As Dixon (2005, p. 1) points out, all aspects of our social lives

unfold within material and symbolic environments ('places') that are both socially constituted and constitutive of the social. Acknowledgement of this so-called 'spatial dimension' opens up new ways of looking at phenomena such as the formation of social identities and relationships.

Edward T. Hall addresses space as "the silent language" (1959) and "the hidden dimension" (1966) forming people's action. Interrogating how people structure their surrounding spaces and places, one can find how they think about and relate to each other. Therefore, it is urgent to study spatial arrangements seriously and add to the growing body of research on spatial turn.

The blooming field of multimodal discourse analysis that studies meaning making in real and second spaces clearly demonstrates the impact of spatial turn. Classrooms are indeed multimodal texts because they contain displays, social actors, sitting arrangements, technologies, etc.

Spaces and places do reflect the wider sociopolitical framework. Based on Edward Soja (1989), the organization of the classroom space is a social product for it arises from purposeful social practices. Soja (1989) further argues that space and its social organization are dialectically interactive. To put it another way, social relations of designing are space forming and space contingent.

It is necessary to make language classrooms as designed spaces attractive and fully-equipped in an atmosphere that is inviting and functional. Visual displays are usually used to make the walls of the classroom engaging. Here, the walls and the displays together constitute the pedagogic tool. However, it must be kept in mind that displays can be charged with naturalizing the teaching environment and with shadowing the exercising of power (Foucault, 1991).

## **2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Semiotic resources such as classroom designs must be pondered upon from historical viewpoints to comprehend how and why semiotics resources as well as semiotic practices change over time based on the interests of the people involved.

As Seaborne (1977) argues, in his history of the British school, a building literally ‘makes’ the teaching method. To Lawn (1999), many instructors do not perceive the influence of the classroom design as a material environment on teaching. Fiske (1995) also mentions that school architecture is totally rooted in nineteenth-century values and that the successful reform of the educational system is in need of rethinking the design of schools and the overall learning environment.

The most common design was the "Lancaster model" introduced in the late eighteenth century and included a schoolroom which accommodated 320 children: "rows of desks were arranged to face the master's platform, spaced so as to allow the monitors to move freely between the rows" (Bennett, Andreae, Hegarthy, & Wade, 1980, p.14). It was a "factory system", "a piece of social machinery that was both simple and economical" (Lawson & Silver, 1973, p. 241).

By the 1930s, influenced by the work of academics like Maria Montessori, the classroom system had already started to be questioned. The ideal infant school would be "not a classroom but a playground, that is to say, not a limited space enclosed by four walls but an open area" (Bennett et al., 1980, p. 17). Bennett et al. (1980) also report that teachers were persuaded to arrange the setting in the classroom so that learners can learn for

themselves. From this period on new schools were constructed and based on the open-plan model.

In order to shed light on the influence of classroom setting on the pedagogic discourse Jewitt's (2005) investigated three school English classrooms in England, turning a multimodal lens on the formal teaching environments. The investigation revealed three discourses at work: English as competence in language communication, English and the life-worlds of students, and English as a means for having your say in the world. In the end, Jewitt (2005, p. 318) discusses that her findings serve to stress social forces that deal with the processes of classroom design, thus moving the academics away from "the rather romantic idea of the individual teacher unconstrained by policy and dislocated from the institution of the school to a more complex view of the teacher as agentive but acting within the realm of the school and educational policies".

With all these things in mind, the paucity of research on classroom as a constructed site is noticeable. The present study, thus, focuses on three different English-language classrooms as illustrative examples in Iran. And for this reason, it would be a worthwhile research endeavor in unmasking the true nature and impact of the teaching environment.

### **3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The research questions have been formulated from a critical discourse analysis standpoint, a perspective that is aimed at producing enlightenment and emancipation in order to do away with a particular kind of delusion (Wodak, 2001).

How are the English-learning classrooms in Iran multi-modally produced and constructed? This main question, actually, was addressed by examining the following sub questions:

1. What do the texts, objects and furniture in a classroom represent as a part of English?
2. Which representational and communicational modes are used to represent English?
3. What is given importance or made central through the resources of visual display and spatial arrangement?
4. What are the effects of the classroom design on the pedagogic discourse and the nature of assessment?

### **4. THE ANALYTICAL TOOLKIT**

In the present research, multimodality is converged with activity theory to discover the design of the English-learning classrooms in Iran.

#### **4.1. Multimodality**

Multimodality offers conceptual tools for making meaning in semiotic modes. The pioneering work by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) on the grammar of the visual image revived earlier semiotic and philosophical attempts for the sake of enhancing the

understanding between meaning in language and other semiotic modes. Actually, the work of Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) was built upon systemic functional grammar of Halliday (1985). Halliday (1985) distinguishes three meta-functions of language in use which he called ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The first metafunction deals with language as representation. The second one constitutes the relation between the participants. Textual meta-function deals with cohesion and coherence in texts. The whole model of systemic functional linguistics is based on the continuous interconnection between these three meta-functions. Multimodality consults with the concept of the meta-functions and applies them to all modes of communication.

The concept of meta-functions is appropriated in this study to investigate the English-learning classroom space and the relevant pedagogic discourse it may contain. The ideational meta-function deals with how the design presents the world and what it communicates. The interpersonal meta-function brings into fore the way the design positions learners in relation to what it presents. Eventually, the third meta-function deals with arrangements of the elements of design.

#### **4.2. Activity Theory**

Activity theory takes into consideration the socially situated character of meaning making. It has its base on the cultural-historical approach to learning of Vygotsky (1981, 1986). Society is seen as embedded in tools (Cole, 1996). All actions are carried out thanks to mediational means (Jones & Norris, 2005). These mediational means include technological and psychological tools. A person's interaction with these two types of tools to reach a target is described as semiotic mediation. Jones and Norris (2005, p. 50) believe that "mediational means are also carriers of social structures, histories, and ideologies in as much as they manifest certain patterns of affordances and constraints concerning the actions that can be taken through their use".

Classroom space can affect the feeling and behavior of learners. In effect, "the pedagogical order of the classroom is mediated in its spaces" (Lawn, 1999, p. 72). Semiotic mediation of displays, furniture, texts, and objects in teaching spaces should not be disregarded for they shape the social relations in addition to interactions that take place in the classroom space that itself embraces a community of practice. Community of practice is central to activity theory. Daniels (2001) aptly puts it that the beliefs and behaviors which are constituted, sustained and developed in communities of practice are progressively acquired as a new member becomes more involved in that community. For that reason, Lave (1993)

describes cognition as extended over, undivided among—mind, body, activity and culturally organized places.

## **5. ANALYSIS**

The following paragraphs are the description and interpretation of the three observed classrooms and the different pedagogic discourses they propagate:

### **5.1. English as Competence in Grammar**

The observed classroom is a typical of the visited language institute. The strictly ordered rows of single brown chairs that face the whiteboard are noticeable. In fact, the chairs have been nailed to the ground so that no one can reposition the chairs. The teacher's desk is the right corners of the classroom. In sum, the arrangement is traditional and a reminder of the banking-model of education or transmission pedagogy in which the teacher has the final say and students follow. The visual displays of the classroom fit into an instructional genre properly. The displays are commercially produced posters that aim to teach vocabulary and grammar via colorful pictures. The rectangular displays are of the same size and are strongly framed through thick lines of color. Further, they are attached on the wall as discrete items. The shape, size, framing, and position of the displays give importance to what learners must master. Product-oriented objectives dominate this teaching environment. The written and mono-modal exam is designed to test learners' competence on grammatical points, somehow mirroring the nature of the discourse produced in the described environment. Clearly, the aim of language learning in this class is enhancing the grammatical competence.

### **5.2. English as Competence in Communication**

At another language institute, all classrooms are based on a similar model. The chairs are laid out in a horseshoe shape. This shape, surely, guarantees frontal teaching and gives the teacher a panoptical chance to observe the work and behavior of students directly. This classroom is a rejection of transmission pedagogy because the arrangements provide opportunities for students to share views with each other and communicate. Visual displays are varied from commercially designed posters to student-created posters. Commercially produced posters are attached on the back wall in a non-salient position. Instead, posters created by students through cooperation in this small community are attached to the three surrounding walls and capture attention due to their salient positions. Moreover, they are of different colors, sizes, and shapes such as triangle. They have not been framed and this shows the interrelatedness of the pieces produced. English is as varied as the visual displays in this teaching environment. The teacher tests learners on both verbal and written ability. The written exam is entirely mono-modal but conversation-centered. Thus, English is a means for gaining communicative competence.

### **5.3. English as Real Life and Culture**

This classroom is in the house of a teacher. There is a brown table in the middle of the room with eight chairs. Seemingly, the teacher's space is not fixed. There is a laptop over the table for watching movies and connecting to the net. The room is carpeted. This classroom is home-like, then. The arrangement is an indication of student-centered

ideologies and a promotion of the idea of teacher as a facilitator. The four walls are decorated with one landscape painting, a poem by William Blake (*The Chimney Sweeper*), several colorful drawing of teenagers' rooms with English description produced by learners themselves, a portrait of Ernest Hemingway, and the movie posters of *Finding Nemo* in addition to *Forrest Gump*. The wall in this space is a working and mediating tool indeed. Teacher is highly agentive and has decorated the space based on her own sophisticated taste. The visual displays are of different materiality, colors, and sizes. Each visual display has its own frame making it distinct from the other items. Popular culture is present. The exam is written but multimodal. The items that test learners' cultural competence are visually-dependent. Black and white drawings accompany some written items. Wholly, English is real life and culture.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Wertsch (1991) asserts that mediated action is predicted on the scheme of an elementary irreducible description of agency as individual(s)-acting-with-mediational-means. The classroom, its spatial arrangement, and its visual displays act as mediators to broaden the cultural capital of students. So, this educational constructed site should not be neglected for it also shapes the discourse produced in it. Thanks to Multimodal Theory and Activity Theory, the true nature of pedagogical designed spaces can be disclosed. The result of the current research indicates that English in Iran is a divided and complicated practice. As a matter of fact, the conception of the English language is different for different teachers and language institutes.

The broader social and policy issues determine the multimodal design of the classroom and, in consequence, the pedagogic discourse in that teaching context in addition to the nature of assessment. The teacher in the third example could challenge the authority of tradition and have more control over the exam for she was teaching in a place that belonged to her. Otherwise, there is always a tension between being fully agentive and fully following the regulatory principles.

Based on Benwell and stoke (2006), physical space is not an objective, neutral element but inevitably socially constructed by human agents and their semiotic practices. They further discuss that physical spaces of all sorts are "all products of social practices, and have to be continually maintained (that is, reconstructed) to fulfill their organizing functions of channeling human activity" (Benwell & stoke, 2006, p. 208).

Kress (1993) puts forward the idea of interest to reveal the motivated and ideological natures of the sign. Interest relates person's choice of one resource over another. From this viewpoint, the classroom as a sign is a product of the complex interaction of the teacher's "physiological, psychological, emotional, cultural, and social origins" (Kress, 1997, p. 11).

In fact, Kress (2000) believes that we need to take into account to the extent to which people transform the resources out of personal and social interests, becoming, in this process, designers of an ever-changing future. "An adequate theory of semiosis will be

founded on a recognition of the ‘interested action’ of socially located, culturally and historically formed individuals, as the remakers, the transformers, and the re-shapers of the representational resources available to them” (Kress, 2000, p. 151).

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