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Discourse Strategies and Power Roles in Student-led Distance Learning

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Abstract

The assertion of identity and power via computer-mediated communication in the context of distance or web-based learning presents challenges to both teachers and students. When regular, face-to-face classroom interaction is replaced by online chat or group discussion forums, participants must avail themselves of new techniques and tactics for contributing to and furthering interaction, discussion, and learning. During student-only chat sessions, the absence of teacher-led, face-to-face classroom activities requires the students to assume leadership roles and responsibilities normally associated with the teacher. This situation raises the questions of who teaches and who learns, how students discursively negotiate power roles, and whether power emerges as a function of displayed expertise and knowledge or rather the use of authoritative language. This descriptive study represents an examination of a corpus of task-based discussion logs among Vietnamese students of distance learning courses in English linguistics. The data reveal recurring discourse strategies for 1) negotiating the progression of the discussion sessions, 2) asserting and questioning knowledge, and 3) assuming or delegating responsibility. Power is defined ad hoc as the ability to successfully perform these strategies. The data analysis contributes to a better understanding of how working methods and materials can be tailored to students in distance learning courses, and how such students can be empowered by being afforded opportunities and effectively encouraged to assert their knowledge and authority.

1. Background to the study

The English Department at Högskolan Dalarna, Sweden, participates in a distance learning program with Vietnam National University. Students enrolled on this program are teachers of English at secondary or tertiary institutions, and study half-time for two years to complete a

Master's degree in English Linguistics. The program includes courses in theoretical and applied linguistics, and encompasses a Master's thesis, which the students write during their last term of study. The program is run as a modified distance program, with students and Högskolan Dalarna's linguistics teachers and course coordinators participating in semi-annual visits at the VNU-Hanoi campus. Coinciding with the start of each academic term, these visits serve both to introduce new courses to existing groups of students, and to administer a new intake of students, approximately 25–30 students per semester. One of the first administrative tasks performed in Hanoi is to divide each new intake of students into four smaller groups (named for each of the four seasons), including the naming of one leader per group.

The distance courses in this program are designed to include not only teacher-led seminars, during which the teacher leads discussion with two of the four sub-groups at once, but also pre-seminars, during which students, in their own sub-groups only, discuss and complete preparatory assignments for the seminars. The inclusion of teacherless pre-seminars in the course design allows for student independence while at the same time encouraging co-operation and solidarity within the group.

In this paper, chatlog data from such student-led pre-seminars are analyzed in terms of discourse strategies and power roles. Power is not defined a priori, but rather identified via the performance of specific and recurring discourse strategies for interaction management. Power, in other words, is asserted by assuming the traditional teacher roles of negotiating the progression of sessions, asserting one's own knowledge or questioning the knowledge of others, and assuming or delegating tasks and responsibilities.

2. Group membership and individual identity

Group membership within each intake is a defining program component for the students. Upon acceptance to the Master's program and further division into a sub-group, each student adopts a new identity, that of a program participant. The composition of the groups is therefore relatively homogeneous, and the status of each student relatively equal, resulting in social relations that can be characterized as horizontal and less influenced by hierarchy (Matsuda, 2002; Nakane, 1970). Despite such favorable circumstances for promoting equality, the contexts of student interaction, that is, pre-seminars and seminars, are nevertheless social contexts, and thus conducive to the emergence of power roles.

While one student per sub-group is indeed designated as the leader, his/her leadership responsibilities are mainly administrative and include arranging pre-seminar meetings and sending chatlogs to the teacher. Thus power remains an "emergent interactional quality" (Jaworski & Coupland, 1999:500), so despite the existence of a group leader, power is not necessarily ascribed (Okabe, 1983) to one participant. Instead, the pre-seminar data suggest that sub-group interaction is fundamentally a social situation which provides boundaries within which students can alternately exercise authority or safely challenge one another. The ability to negotiate power within the sub-group is a reflection of each student's sense of belonging to the group and the value attributed to group membership (Tajfel, 1974). As a group member, each student is therefore ratified to exercise leadership, thereby assuming a power position.

From a linguistic point of view, power is usually recognized and defined as a function of discourse, that is, via the discursive construction of a powerful or powerless identity. Powerful language has been characterized as confident, assertive or dominant (Hosman, 1989) and "perceived as more persuasive and credible than powerless language" (Burrell & Koper, 1994:252), while powerless language is hesitant and tentative, including "more polite forms, hedges, hesitations, disclaimers, intensifiers, empty adjectives, tag questions and hypercorrect grammar" (Grob et al., 1997:293). The present study suggests, however, that power roles can in fact be performed via powerless language, while assertive language may not necessarily result in successful exertion of a power role. Thus, the traditional approach to the linguistic performance of power may not apply to computer-mediated communication in the distance learning environment. Instead, the data presented in the following sections indicate that power is a function of the successful performance of teaching roles, including discourse strategies for negotiating progression, asserting or questioning knowledge, and assuming or delegating responsibility.

3. Negotiating the progression of discussion

In the pre-seminar situation, while students are encouraged to exchange ideas and display knowledge, they are aware of the main goal of completing a specific task in preparation for the teacher-led seminar. For this reason, students can frequently be observed participating in two distinct kinds of activity: furthering the progression of the pre-seminar or acting as a subject authority. These activities can there-

fore be said to reflect goal-orientation (progression through the pre-seminar task) or content expertise (displaying subject-matter knowledge). In example (1), a pre-seminar has just been started, with each of the participating students added to the chat session by the group leader. In all examples[1], the students are individually numbered and coded according to sub-group (season) membership:

(1) [9:05:58 PM] summerleader added sum1, sum2, sum3, sum4, sum5 to this chat
[9:06:01 PM] summerleader says: Hi
[9:06:13 PM] summerleader says: have anyone opened a room?
[9:06:54 PM] sum4 says: no, your duty
[9:07:02 PM] sum4 says: :D
[9:07:17 PM] summerleader says: I can see that everyone's here
[9:07:27 PM] sum4 says: i see all on line
[9:07:32 PM] summerleader says: yes
[9:07:39 PM] summerleader says: it's good
[9:07:46 PM] summerleader says: rarely
[9:07:50 PM] summerleader says: we can see all
[9:07:55 PM] sum1 says: I am here
[9:08:03 PM] summerleader says: shall we start now?

As the group leader, summerleader has the responsibility of starting the pre-seminar chat by adding the group members and initiating the discussion. The leader therefore has ascribed power, in that this responsibility is exclusively the leader's. The response by sum4 of "no, your duty" to summerleader's inquiry "have anyone opened a room?" indicates a recognition of this responsibility as unique to the group leader, and thus other group members are neither expected to take this action nor are they entitled to. It is interesting to note in this example that despite the group leader's inherent power, the language of the entries can be characterized as powerless. The questions "have anyone opened a room?" and "shall we start now?" are indirect speech acts, the perlocutionary act of the former being that no other rooms should be opened, while the illocutionary act of the latter is the initiation of the discussion (Austin, 1962). Summerleader's other entries can also be considered powerless, in that they reflect neither goal-orientation nor content expertise. Thus, despite her status of leader, a power role entailing traditional teacher responsibilities, summerleader does not employ powerful language in the traditional sense. Nevertheless, her power is recognized and performed through the discourse strategies of negotiating progression of the pre-seminar.

In the next example, the pre-seminar topic is language and gender, and the students are to discuss and analyze two sets of data: male and female biographies and single-sex conversations:

(2) [10:44:35 PM] springleader says: so, we'll come to the assignment […]
[10:45:02 PM] springleader says: 'single-sex conversation" […]
[10:45:23 PM] springleader says: do you find any differences?
[10:45:28 PM] spr4 says: I think they have a big difference in job profile
[10:45:33 PM] spr2 says: topic
[10:45:40 PM] springleader says: 'single-sex conversation"
[10:45:59 PM] spr4 says: Ruth didn't go to University, but Damien did
[10:45:59 PM] springleader says: We will come to the biography later spr4
[10:46:06 PM] spr2 says: it is not a conversation I think
[10:46:10 PM] spr5... says: between male first
[10:46:13 PM] spr4 says: let's come to the background first
[10:46:16 PM] spr3 says: Man doesn't overlap in conversation
[10:46:17 PM] springleader says: please 'single-sex conversation"

[10:46:17 PM] spr1 says: I found out some differences in Male and Female conversations
[10:46:32 PM] spr3 says: Man doesn't overlap in conversation
[10:46:36 PM] spr1 says: Right, spr3
[10:46:46 PM] springleader says: (please continue. I'll be back. My baby is crying)
[10:46:47 PM] spr4 says: Good
[10:46:56 PM] spr5... says: SINGLE-SEX CON BETWEEN MALE FRIENDS

The leader performs the goal-oriented act of directing the group's attention to the assignment, "so, we'll come to the assignment". There is a specification of which data set to begin with, "single-sex conversation", followed by a question to initiate discussion, "do you find any differences?" Springleader's goal-oriented discourse is that of a teacher, and together with her status as leader further function to position her in a power role. Nevertheless, her direction goes unnoticed or even ignored, as various group members begin to discuss the other data set. Redirection is attempted twice: "We will come to the biography later spr4" and "please 'single-sex conversation'", before springleader retreats, "(please continue. I'll be back. My baby is crying)". At this point, another student takes over springleader's leader/teacher role by repeating her original

instructions, "SINGLE-SEX CON BETWEEN MALE FRIENDS". Here, capitalization, often interpreted in computer-mediated communication as shouting (Crystal, 2001) indeed functions as an attention-getter and unequivocally serves to introduce focus to the discussion.

The absence of a teacher – and thereby obvious authority – in student–student pre-seminar interaction can be countered by the naming of a group leader, who is expected to perform the traditional goal-oriented duties of a teacher. Examples (1) and (2) suggest, however, that the language used by leaders may not include characteristics of powerful language, and that powerful language may not be sufficient to assert power.

4. Asserting and questioning knowledge

Another traditional teacher role which students assume in pre-seminar interaction is the assertion of their own and, more significantly, the questioning of others' knowledge. Such practices are characteristic of negotiating content expertise, which is also part of pre-seminar assignments in that there is a topic to discuss and specific questions to answer. The students are expected to show an understanding of the concepts pertaining to the topic, as well as

agree on answers to the questions, as these will be presented in the teacher-led seminar. The students can therefore not progress between assignment tasks until they are addressed and answered satisfactorily.

In example (3), members of the Autumn group are discussing language and gender, focussing on the analysis of single-sex conversations:

(3) [9:07:32 PM] aut1 says: they have the same opinon
[9:07:39 PM] aut1 says: at the end of the talk
[9:07:47 PM] aut2 says: I don't think so, aut3.
[9:08:02 PM] autumnleader says: no not that aut3
[9:08:22 PM] aut1 says: they are probably more rational than women
[9:08:24 PM] aut3 says: that's people's saying
[9:08:41 PM] aut4 says: that's because men often talk more frankly than women, not necessarily they are wiser
[9:08:42 PM] aut2 says: They give their answers to the question right from the beginning.
[9:08:45 PM] aut1 says: women are sentimental

[9:08:57 PM] autumnleader says: yeah
[9:08:56 PM] aut2 says: right.
[9:08:58 PM] aut5 says: Yes, aut2
[9:09:02 PM] aut3 says: we shouldn't express our ideas right in the beginning
[9:09:12 PM] autumnleader says: why?
[9:09:19 PM] aut5 says: At the end they just repeat their opinion
[9:09:21 PM] aut1 says: the first male jumps into the talk immediately
[9:09:26 PM] aut3 says: people's experience
[9:09:33 PM] aut2 says: unluckily we have no man in our group.!!!
[9:09:36 PM] aut1 says: no hesitation
[9:09:42 PM] aut3 says: what's a pity
[9:09:53 PM] autumnleader says: yeah
[9:10:14 PM] aut1 says: we shouldn't pity ourselves
[9:10:27 PM] aut1 says: we are all fine without them

Although several students are engaged in the discussion in example (3), it is aut1 who most assertively displays knowledge. While each of the other group members (autumnleader, aut2, aut3, aut4 and aut5) negotiate content in reaction to a previous comment by aut3, aut1 engages in a monologue, seemingly unaware of or perhaps uninterested in the parallel dis-

cussion. It is not until aut3's reaction "what a pity" to aut2's exclamation "unluckily we have no man in our group.!!!" that aut1 takes notice of the others' discussion, commenting as well in an assertive, authoritative manner, "we shouldn't pity ourselves" and "we are all fine without them". In this way, aut3 presents a knowledgable, authoritative and therefore powerful identity discursively constructed with language that is assertive, dominant and confident.

In example (4), the Summer group is discussing language and gender, analyzing male and female-authored autobiographies:

(4) [9:33:20 PM] sum4 says: what Do you think if I say the first biography was written by a man and the second by a women?
[9:33:33 PM] sum2 says: It can't be that
[9:33:42 PM] sum1 says: no I do not think so
[9:33:53 PM] sum2 says: They wrote about themselves
[9:34:00 PM] sum1 says: look at their email sum4
[9:34:15 PM] sum4 says: no,
[9:34:27 PM] sum1 says: so I think They wrote
[9:34:31 PM] sum4 says: that is not the clue

[9:34:39 PM] sum2 says: What do you mean sum4?

[9:34:43 PM] sum3 says: but i think she writes on her own

[9:34:46 PM] sum1 says: why not

[9:35:05 PM] sum3 says: by herself

[9:35:07 PM] sum4 says: I think someone wrote their biography

[9:35:24 PM] sum1 says: because these put on web page

[9:35:28 PM] sum2 says: No sum4, Look at the instructions

[9:35:33 PM] summerleader says: but what make u think this 1st

[9:35:39 PM] summerleader says: is written by a man

[9:35:46 PM] summerleader says: and the second is by a woman?

[9:35:49 PM] sum1 says: so it must be with email

[9:36:12 PM] sum1 says: of the writer

[9:36:21 PM] sum4 says: the first's short, clear and simple sentence structures
Time periods are very clear

[9:36:32 PM] sum4 says: I mean it's in order

[9:36:43 PM] sum1 says: we will ask teacher later

Sum4 initiates discussion by posing a question, inviting the others to comment on her evaluation of the data set. There is general agreement among the others that sum4's evaluation is incorrect, and there follows a rather long period of discussion, explanation of opinion and negotiation of task interpretation. Sum4 has in fact misunderstood the explanation of data in the assignment, which clearly states the gender of the writers. Both sum1 and sum2 disagree explicitly with sum4 ("no I do not think so" and "It can't be that"), and sum3 disagrees as well, although less directly, "but i think she writes on her own". Summerleader takes on a teacher role, requesting an explanation from sum4 ("but what make you think …"), which sum4 provides ("the first's short …"). However, it is sum1 who initiates an end to the long sequence of negotiation with the goal-oriented entry "we will ask teacher later". Such deference to the teacher is a recurring strategy for resolving such conflicts, usually invoked after similarly long sequences of negotiation where general agreement or understanding is unachievable.

5. Assuming and delegating responsibility

Negotiating progression of pre-seminars and asserting and questioning knowledge are performed by discursive strategies reflecting goal-

orientation and content-expertise, respectively. Assuming and delegating responsibility, on the other hand, are performed by discursive strategies which reflect both goal-orientation and content-expertise at once. In example (5), the Spring group are discussing language and gender:

(5) [10:23:27 PM] springleader says: any more questions on the book and the lecture?
[10:23:27 PM] spr1 says: I have one question on Page 81
[10:23:31 PM] springleader says: yes
[10:23:33 PM] spr2 says: we go through the course book first I think
[10:23:50 PM] spr3 says: which one spr1?
[10:23:59 PM] springleader says: yes, your question spr1?
[10:23:58 PM] spr1 says: I don't understand the example in (7)
[10:24:20 PM] spr1 says: everybody understands (7)?
[10:24:25 PM] spr4 says: what about sexism in discourse?
[10:24:28 PM] spr2 says: we don't say lord gentlemen spr1
[10:24:43 PM] springleader says: lady here is a semantic derogation
[10:24:57 PM] springleader says: spr4, can you take spr1's question?

Example (5) begins with springleader's goal-oriented entry "any more questions on the book and the lecture?", signalling a desire to conclude a phase and/or continue the progress of the pre-seminar. Throughout example (5), springleader performs typical teacher/leader tasks, such as this comprehension check, fielding questions and, by repeating spr3's request for clarification, even indirectly denying another the right to assume leadership. It is springleader's last entry in example (5), however, in which responsibility is delegated to another student, "spr4, can you take spr1's question?" that fully establishes the power position of leader/teacher.

In example (6), the Autumn leader has started the pre-seminar chat, with the task of discussing language and gender:

(6) [8:49:27 PM] autumnleader says: HI, everybody […]
[8:51:10 PM] aut1 says: is everybody here
[8:51:38 PM] aut2 says: yes, exept aut3.
[8:51:53 PM] autumnleader added aut3 to this chat […]
[8:52:38 PM] aut1 says: so we are all here
[8:53:00 PM] aut1 says: let's start our discussion, ok?
[8:53:01 PM] autumnleader says: yeah. we are all here

[8:53:03 PM] aut2 says: Should we start?
[8:53:05 PM] autumnleader says: sure
[8:53:24 PM] aut1 says: shall we look at the two conversations first
[8:53:33 PM] aut2 says: ok.
[8:53:36 PM] autumnleader says: ok

The leader has performed the expected duty of starting a chat group and adding the group members. However, aut3 is not present, and aut2's answer "yes, exept aut3" to aut1's check on attendance prompts autumnleader to add aut3. Much like "no, your duty" in example (1), aut2's indirect speech act confirms the fact that leaders are expected to perform certain duties. Once this administrative task is performed, however, both aut1 and aut2 assume leadership responsibilities, using goal-oriented discourse, "let's start our discussion, ok?" and "Should we start?" It is aut1 who retains leader status by taking responsibility for initiating content-expertise, "shall we look at the two conversations first". Both aut2 and autumnleader affirm aut1's leadership with the non-challenging "ok" and "sure".

6. Discussion

During student-only pre-seminar chat sessions, the absence of teacher-led, face-to-face classroom activities requires the students to assume leadership roles and responsibilities normally associated with the teacher. This situation raises the questions of who teaches and who learns, how students discursively negotiate power roles, and whether power emerges as a function of displayed expertise and knowledge or rather the use of authoritative language. The examples presented in this study and extracted from a corpus of task-based discussion logs among Vietnamese students of distance learning courses in English linguistics reveal recurring discourse strategies for negotiating the progression of the discussion sessions, asserting and questioning knowledge, and assuming or delegating responsibility. Power is defined ad hoc as the ability to successfully perform these strategies. The students who manage the progression of the pre-seminar, assert and question knowledge, and assume or delegate responsibility are those who exhibit typical teacher behavior, and thus are recognized as performing power identities.

The data analysis contributes to a better understanding of how working methods and materials can be tailored to students in distance learning courses, and how such students can be empowered by being afforded opportunities and effectively encouraged to assert their knowledge and authority. The Vietnamese students of Högskolan Dalarna's Master's of English linguistics distance program benefit from

pre-seminars by having a chance to actively prepare for subsequent student–teacher interaction, during which students are evaluated according to their ability to apply knowledge. Student–student interaction within their groups during the pre-seminar allows students to exchange ideas, display knowledge, exercise authority or safely challenge each other.

The pre-seminar data challenge the relationship between power and language, suggesting that power is not necessarily a function of powerful language, but rather is associated with discursive strategies for performing typical teacher responsibilities. This raises the question of how students can be empowered in the distance-learning context. The appointment of a group leader facilitates the process of empowerment by relegating to the leader specific, goal-oriented duties. A group leader also introduces the notion of an authority figure, which can be exploited for the purpose of interaction management, but thanks to the administrative nature of leader status, does not necessarily jeopardize the horizontal social relationships within the groups. Power identities are therefore continuously negotiable and accessible to all, as they are achieved through the performance of recurring discursive strategies.

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Footnotes

[1] The extracts are copied from the chatlogs. Language and typing errors are not corrected.