

Chapter 5

Language, power and education

In this chapter you will:

- Explore how language is used in the practice of teaching
- Consider the link between language and the role of teachers
- Analyse how language is used to create power in the classroom

This chapter explores how language is used in an education context and how the various hierarchies within that context are reinforced through language. There are two distinct elements that could be considered here: classroom discourse, and wider practices and procedures in the education context. The focus in this chapter will be on the classroom, looking at the roles played by teachers and students in this context.

5.1 Traditional classroom discourse

Society accepts the asymmetrical relationship between teacher and student, and that the teacher is the powerful person due to their role and status. In Chapter 2 you learned that this acceptance gives the teacher instrumental power.

5.1.1 How teachers demonstrate instrumental power

Within the classroom, a teacher may show their power in a number of ways. They may:

- direct and instruct students
- gain the attention of students
- challenge students
- dictate how and when students speak.

To begin thinking about how teachers use language in these ways, study

Text 5A, a transcript from a Year 7 English lesson (11–12-year-old students) in the UK. Think about the ways the teacher uses language to show her power.

Text 5A

T: right then (.) listen up (.) you've got your notes (.) page notes (.) right (.) Will (.) can you leave the table alone (.) thank you (1) right (.) before you do your talks I'm going to show you an example of a bad talk (.) and I'm going to give you (.) give each of you a post it note and what I want you to do is to write down (.) on that post it note (.) a target for the person doing the talk (1) right (1) so (.) I'll give you a post it note erm to write a target for the person giving the talk (.) you look a bit down (.) you alright (1)

P1: miss the bottom's come off of my shoe

T: oh erm (.) we'll find someone to sort that out for you (.) no worries (.) sure there is someone in the technology block who has some glue (.)

ok (.) hands down everyone (.) wait until I've told everyone (.) told you all what we're up (.) going to do today (2) Adam why's your hand up

P2: miss I got a trophy this morning

T: what did you get your trophy for (.) oh tell you what you can tell me more about that later on (.) did I give you guys a post it (.) can you talk to me (.) what's the face for Ricky (.) nobody wants to do it at first but everyone when they've done it feels great (.) Ok (.) Ok (.) ready (.) so (.) pick your target for this person in an example of a bad talk (.) don't start chatting guys (.) Josh (2) thank you

Directing and instructing the students

To do this, the teacher uses an interrogative and an imperative.

- At the start of the transcript, the teacher uses the interrogative 'can you leave the table alone', despite not actually meaning it as a question. Pragmatically this is an instruction with the expectation that the student sees it as an order and complies. This expectation is reinforced when the teacher immediately follows the interrogative with the politeness marker 'thank you', rather than with the more common politeness marker 'please'. There is an assumption that the table will be left alone. The teacher uses this technique to ensure that her instructions are carried out.

- She also uses an imperative to direct and instruct: 'pick your target...'. Imperatives are common features of instrumental power, as discussed in Chapter 2, and act as a clear indicator of someone's role and status. A teacher's role gives them the authority to give direct orders and this authority is accepted in the classroom context. In this case, the imperative is task based with the desired outcome of the students producing some work. As you will see, this is just one reason for using an imperative.

Gaining the attention of the students

To ensure the students are paying attention to her, the teacher uses **discourse markers**, an imperative and students' names.

- In this transcript, discourse markers are the key tool the teacher uses to get the students' attention. She uses 'right', 'ok' and 'so' in an attempt to focus the students on what she is saying. This is a common technique used by speakers in spontaneous speech and not necessarily used as a power tool. Often discourse markers are used to signpost discourse, inviting turn-taking or joining ideas together. On occasions, they are also used in a more controlling manner, as in this transcript. They act as a signal to the students that they need to focus on the teacher or that they need to listen to what follows.

- The teacher also uses an imperative to gain attention when she says 'listen up', demonstrating another function of imperatives in teacher/student discourse.
- She also uses students' names to gain attention: 'Will (.) can you...'; 'what's the face for Ricky'. This is a common classroom technique and an obvious one when the discourse may involve 30 different people. The need to direct a question or statement at an individual by using their name is, of course, necessary in the context. Using someone's name during a one-to-one conversation is far less likely.

KEY TERM

Discourse marker: a word, phrase or clause that helps to organise what is said or written (e.g. 'OK', 'so', 'as I was saying...')

Challenging students

One inherent, and accepted, aspect of a teacher's role is to challenge any actions by students that are inappropriate given the context, and to then reinforce rules and expectations. This power is linked to the accepted hierarchy within the classroom; the teacher has power behind the discourse and, according to Wareing, personal power (as discussed in Chapter 2). In Text 5A, the teacher challenges the students by using an interrogative and an imperative.

- After giving the instruction 'hands down...'; she uses the interrogative 'Adam why's your hand up' to challenge him for not following instructions. Here again it could be argued that the teacher does not really want an answer; instead she wants Adam to put his hand down and thus follow the initial instruction.
- The teacher also uses the imperative 'don't start chatting guys' which acts as a direct challenge to the students' actions. There is a clear purpose here – that the students modify their behaviour. Once again, due to the teacher's personal power and status within the school context, this expectation is likely to be met. However, it could be argued that this particular teacher softens and mitigates the imperative by using the informal term 'guys' at the end. This may be a further attempt by the teacher to develop the relationship to ensure the students act as she wants them to.

Dictating how and when students speak

Teachers may also influence speaking rights; that is to say they might decide which students may speak and when during a lesson. In many classroom interactions, the teacher will hold the floor and control the discourse, as you saw in Chapter 2. It is accepted that teachers can speak as much as they want and say whatever they want in the classroom whilst students are far more restricted and need permission to speak. In Text 5A, students are invited to speak through

the use of an interrogative which invites a response: 'you alright'. In many cases this will be linked to teacher nomination, when the teacher decides who to question. The question/answer discourse structure is very common in classrooms and often followed by an evaluation or feedback, often referred to as **initiate, respond, evaluation/feedback (IRE or IRF)**, as in Text 5B.

Text 5B

- T: what punctuation mark should we use here
- P: a comma
- T: excellent (.) well done

KEY TERM

Initiation, Response, Evaluation/Feedback (IRE/IRF): three-part conversational exchange in which a speaker starts the conversation, a second speaker responds and the first speaker then provides some feedback to what the second speaker said

The use of IRE/IRF has been the subject of research, with the work of John Sinclair and Malcolm Coulthard (1975) being particularly influential. According to Sinclair and Coulthard, the discourse in a classroom is rather rigid and led by the teacher. It is the teacher's role to initiate the exchange (often through questions) and then, once the student has responded, to offer some evaluative comment. The student expects some feedback; they want to know if they are right or wrong so that they are developing their knowledge and understanding. They may also be seeking praise from the teacher for being an active participant in the exchange. Thus the IRE/IRF structure relates once again to the concept of role as the teacher is the one with the accepted status and authority.

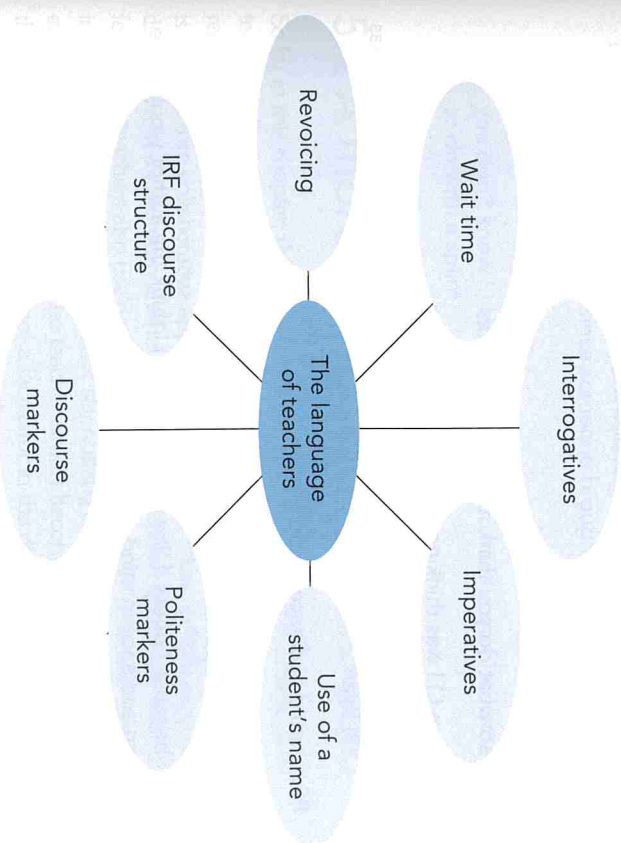
The idea of speaking rights certainly links to the asymmetrical relationship in a classroom but the IRF model also points to the need for teachers to be positive, supportive and encouraging of their students. This can also be achieved through what O'Connor and Michaels (1996) termed 'revoicing', when teachers include the student's response in the subsequent discourse. O'Connor and Michaels claimed that repeating what the student says serves various purposes:

- to draw other students' attention to the comment and show its importance
- to encourage better understanding whilst still recognising and sharing the importance of the contribution
- to encourage further discussion and contribution (similar to IRE/IRF).

The actual questions teachers use are another important aspect of how they dictate how and when students speak. Mary Budd Rowe has made this aspect of classroom discourse a major focus of her research. She argues that 'when teachers ask questions of students, they typically wait 1 second or less for the students to start a reply; after the student stops speaking they begin their reaction or proffer the next question in less than 1 second'. However, if the teacher waits longer (for example, three seconds or more) 'there are pronounced changes in student use of language as well as in student and teacher attitudes and expectations' (Rowe 1986). This idea of 'wait time' has become a well-known teaching technique and Rowe's research showed that by using it teachers ask fewer questions but that more questions are complex. Furthermore, she found that teachers become more adept at responding to students' contributions and that their expectations of students increase, resulting in less passive learning and more active participants. In relation to power in the classroom, Rowe's research shows that the teacher is dictating the discourse by introducing 'wait time' when questioning students.

The key language features and concepts used by teachers that have been discussed so far are summarised in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1: Key language features and concepts used by teachers



ACTIVITY 5.1

Exploring key features of teacher/student talk

Read Texts 5C and 5D, both transcripts of teacher/student talk. Then annotate the transcripts, identifying as many of the key language features shown in Figure 5.1 as you can. Can you find examples of each feature? Can you identify common patterns? Are there other language features which are common across the transcripts?

Once you have annotated the data, discuss why the teachers might have used specific language features. Can you, for example, see how imperatives may have different functions?

Text 5C

- T: so my first activity for you guys is this (.) you can do it in a four (.) I want you to look at these different kinds of contextual thingamajigs (.) right (.) I want you to put them into like (.) a pyramid (.) so what you think is the most important (.) at the top and kind of (2) what's next most important and make it into a pyramid (.) alright with that (2) separate them first of all and then you can talk to each other (.) Elle alright
- P1: yeah miss (.)
- T: so what do you think might be at the top
- P1: erm (.) I was thinking when it were written
- T: yes when it was written that's definitely important (.) any other ideas (2) Ryan
- P2: could audience be up there
- T: audience (.) yes I think it would up there (.) but why do you think that's important
- P2: because I guess if like (.) the author (.) I think the author would have an audience in mind

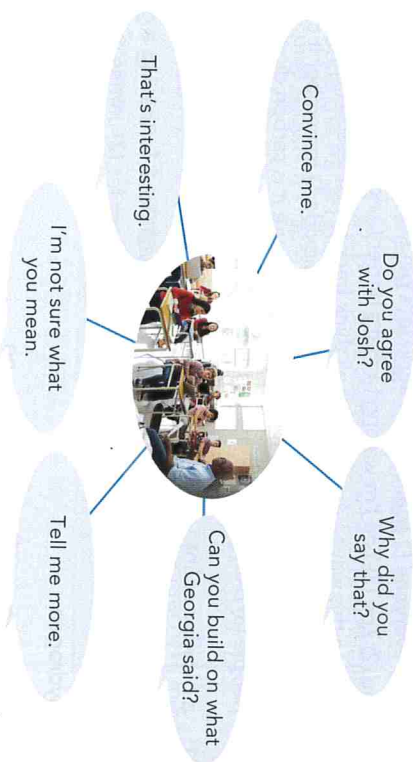
Text 5D

- T: okay everyone (.) coats off quickly (.) let's get settled (.) Michael (.) thank you (2) Zoe (3) Zoe I'm waiting (.) that's better (.) right year 9 everyone looking this way (.) Anne (.) let's all think back to last lesson (.) who can remember how we make sure it is carbon dioxide (.) remember it could be anything couldn't it (.) how can we make sure it is carbon dioxide people (3) okay (.) what's the test for carbon dioxide (2) Michael
- P1: a glowing splint
- T: a glowing splint no that's not the one (2) well done for having a go Michael (.) come on you lot what does that test for (2) James
- P2: hydrogen
- T: not hydrogen (3) not hydrogen no
- P3: oxygen
- T: oxygen (.) what does it do to it Nicola
- P3: relights the splint
- T: relights the splint (.) well done (.) are you listening Jack (.) put that pen down so I can see you're paying attention (.) so what's the test for hydrogen then since someone brought that one up (.) Jack
- P4: dunno
- T: you don't know (.) have a try (.) you can have a go (.) it's something to do with a splint

5.2 A more collaborative classroom

So far in this chapter, the focus has been on teachers being in charge. It is teachers who steer and influence discourse. They ask the questions, students respond and teachers feed back. However, research has also shown that there is often a more collaborative approach to teaching. Dillon (1983) argued that discussions in a classroom are not always led by teacher questions. Instead he found that teachers also use declarative statements, offer reflective comments, invite other students to elaborate, or say nothing and use silence as a tool to encourage discussion. Thus the teacher almost becomes less authoritative in the students' minds and more of a facilitator in the discussion. Such techniques improve communication and are an attempt to get the most reticent of learners to become more involved. Such discussion stimulates deeper thinking rather than a closed question/answer session. Consider the speech bubbles around Figure 5.2 and how the teacher is encouraging more discussion amongst a group of students.

Figure 5.2: Encouraging collaboration



It is clear in each of these utterances that the teacher is not relying on the IRF structure or on asking closed questions. Instead, they are using their role and status to encourage wider contributions. At times the teacher will remove themselves from the discussion, encouraging students to question each other and communicate as a group. Jay Lemke (1982) discussed this idea, calling it 'cross-discussion': 'Cross-Discussion is dialogue between students in which teacher is not a constant intermediary. Such dialogue is rare as part of the discourse of the classroom ... Public cross-discussion is signalled when one student addresses another publicly rather than addressing teacher [or] if teacher is referred to in the third person.' Therefore, the teacher relinquishes their role but it is important to remember that they have the authority to do this and, as they are still a presence in the discussion, their influence and power is still evident.

The collaborative classroom is certainly an emerging area in education. As the Center for the Collaborative Classroom in California, USA states, 'Teachers who use the Collaborative Classroom model make an intentional shift from having a classroom where they do the majority of the talking to constructing a learning situation and then facilitating it through student thinking and talking': (www.cambridge.org/links/escpow6016). This is clearly a departure from the more structured discourse which Sinclair and Coulthard presented in their research. However, it is important to recognise that the role of the teacher is vital to the success of a collaborative classroom. Students will not automatically be fully engaged in the shifting dynamics of such a classroom. Teachers need to know how to make it work, first teaching the principles to their students. They will need to:

- establish rules for group discussion
- teach students how to listen effectively

- demonstrate what good questioning looks like
- ensure certain students do not dominate
- teach students how to respond appropriately.

Therefore, the role of the teacher remains vital in this negotiation of roles to create a supportive learning environment.

ACTIVITY 5.2

Extended teacher talk

Texts 5E and 5F are transcripts from the same lesson. Read the transcripts and consider the following questions.

- In what ways does this teacher dominate the classroom?
- What could the teacher change to facilitate a more collaborative classroom?

Text 5E

Now we've got lots to do this morning, you're going to need to ignore what's going on behind me, ah, it's not happening, right, as I said to you at the very beginning of September I'm the star, so you pay attention to me. That was the correct thing to do, very well though, you saw the look and you decided. On the board this morning we're going to have a bash at thinking about some targets, we're going to have a bash think about, how you think you've done so far? One of the two tasks that I've set you since we met in September, what are the two big tasks that we've concentrated on? One should be in your file already and it should be finished and the other one you're going to give to me today.

Taken from the Cambridge English Corpus

Text 5F

Yes, the time when it has to come in, the day I say I want to collect it, now you might need to say to yourself, oh dear, Mrs deadline was, have I met it? No, or yes I'm mega brilliant, yes I did meet the deadline. Now I'm going to help you with it and what I suggest we do this morning when I give you these sheets will you please write your name and today's date at the top of the sheet and I put the date on the board, and then can you please resist the temptation to start, start writing over the rest of the sheet until I've gone through it with you. You can certainly have a read but please resist the

temptation to write on it. Right the sheets are coming round, when you get yours, your name on it and today's date on it please, that's all, I've already punched holes in it so it's ready to go in your file [pause] Now is there anyone who does not have one of these sheets, it says at the top year seven, module one, survey on belief. Is there anyone who does not have a copy in front of them? Please write your name and the date. The date is on the board [pause] Oh, we'll do that later that one, get you another one [pause] good, most people seem to of done that. [...] Okay, let's start going down these six sections. Section one says, now for this everybody we're thinking about the survey you did in the form room, from which you did your graphs, saying to people do you believe in god, have you visited a place of worship, is everyone clear about the piece of work we're thinking about, speak to me.

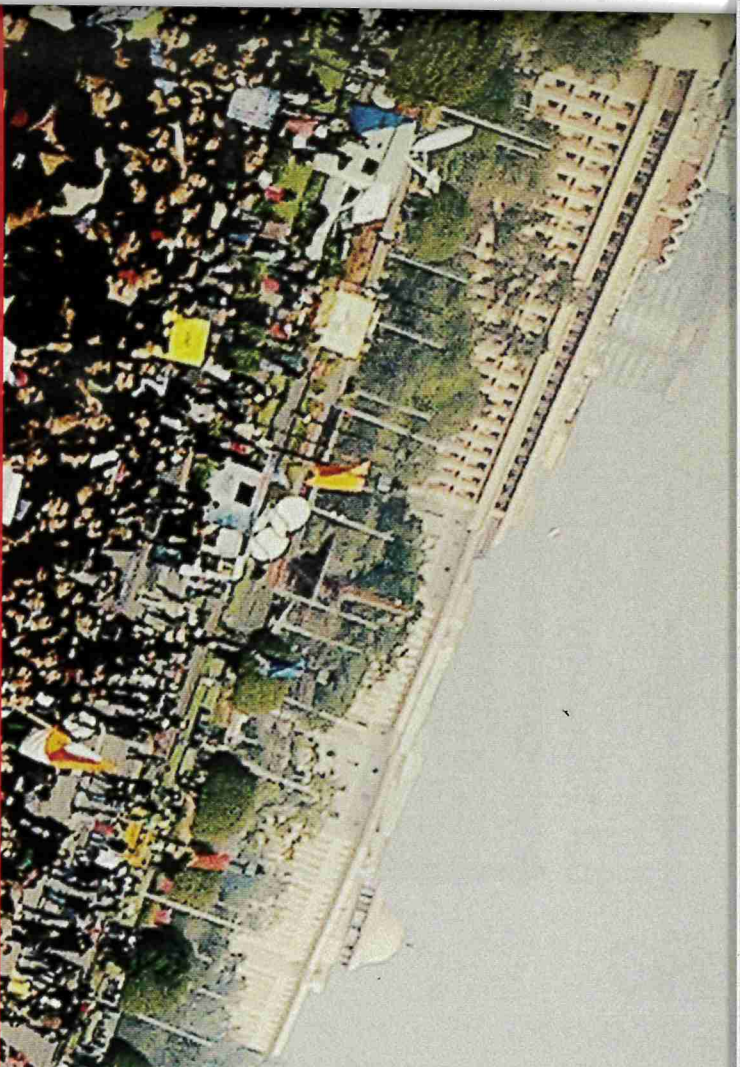
Taken from the Cambridge English Corpus

It is clear that power in the classroom ultimately lies with the teacher. They are the ones who ask all the questions, give instructions, offer feedback, encourage participation, challenge students' attitudes and behaviour, direct who can speak and when, and ensure students' attention is focused on them. To do this they use a range of language features which are accepted and expected by the students in this context. However, it is also important to recognise that the distinct roles of teacher and student can become slightly blurred to further develop a student's thinking and learning.

Wider reading

You can find out more about the topics in this chapter by reading the following:

- Cole, K. and Zuengler, J. (2017) *The Research Process in Classroom Discourse Analysis: Current Perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Moorman, C. and Moorman-Weber, N. (1989) *Teacher Talk: What It Really Means*. Bay City, MI: Institute for Personal Power.
- Rymes, B. (2015) *Classroom Discourse Analysis: A Tool For Critical Reflection*, (Second Edition). London: Routledge.
- Walsh, S. (2013) *Classroom Discourse and Teacher Development*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Walsh, S. (2011) *Exploring Classroom Discourse: Language in Action*. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis.



Chapter 6 Language, power and politics

In this chapter you will:

- Reflect on some of the ways that political language can be used to influence, persuade, manipulate and coerce an audience
- Consider how the Critical Discourse Analysis model may be applied to political discourse
- Examine the use of rhetorical devices in political speeches, interviews and debates