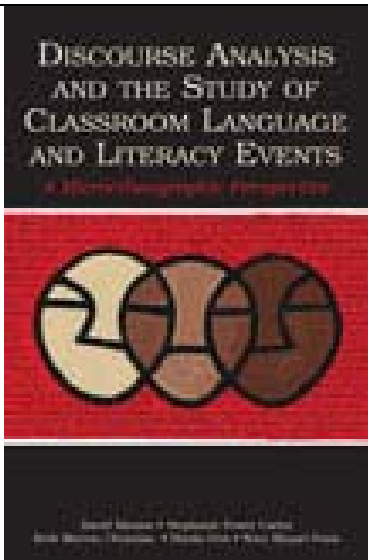


<p><i>Discourse Analysis and the Study of Classroom Language and Literacy Events: A Microethnographic Perspective</i> Blome, D., Carter, S. P., Christian, B. M., Otto, S., & Shuart-Faris, N. (2005) Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates ISBN: 0-8058-5320-0 (paperback) Cost: USD \$34.50 <i>Reviewed by Lawrence Jun Zhang</i> National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University 1 Nanyang Walk, Singapore 637616, Republic of Singapore E-mail: jzhang@nie.edu.sg</p>	
---	--

Discourse Analysis and the Study of Classroom Language and Literacy Events presents analyses of classroom discourse in relation to language and literacy events from a microethnographic perspective. It is a timely publication that reflects increasingly strong concerns over issues ranging from gender, race, identity and power relations within and beyond classrooms. The book contains a forward, an introduction and five chapters.

The forward by Brian Street begins the book well on a good note. It is in this forward that Street sets a clear tone by introducing some of the important issues concerning the topic with which the authors engage themselves. He swiftly highlights the authors' laudable efforts to have successfully built a close link between their analysis of linguistic features of social interaction with what Gee (1999) calls the "social turn" in language study that extends from the social nature of identity (i.e., the construction of identity is socially determined), power relations in classroom events, to the role of multiple literacies, which are important topics in discussions on literacy and multiliteracies (e.g., Luke, 2003; New London Group, 1996). He concludes his forward in a fashion with metaphoric use of language by comparing the authors to what Yeats described in his poem; namely, the authors are "dancers in the dance, their glance and their bodies cannot be excluded from the question of choreography posed by Yeats, which runs throughout this elegant and well balanced book" (p. xi). Meanwhile, he cautions that, while it is true that the authors approach the classroom language and literacy events at a micro level, researchers need to analyze their own framing and interpreting of the classroom language and literacy events.

Immediately following the forward is the introduction, whose purpose it is to introduce the authors' approach to discourse analysis. The authors explain that the approach they have adopted in the book is basically "social linguistic" or "social interactional" (p. xv) within the large framework that examines the sociology of language use. For the sake of clarity, the authors label it a microethnographic approach. Given the nature of the book (i.e., it is a series of research studies of language and literacy events in classrooms), the authors should be commended for their clear description of their work in the introduction. By virtue of the clarity of the introduction, any beginning researchers intending to follow the ethnographic paradigm in methodological orientation or those who are classroom teachers but interested in knowing something about how researchers interpret and frame their daily language-related activities will find that the introduction prepare them well for a sustained reading experience. It is in this introduction that the authors clearly delineate the specific theoretical positions and frameworks for data analysis and interpretation. They state that the particular approach they have adopted in their work builds on sociolinguistic ethnography (i.e., microethnographic), linguistic anthropology, related discussions on human communication, anthropological studies of narratives and poetics, the New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1999, 2000; Street, 2003), ethnomethodology, and discussions that evolved from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Valentin Volosinov, Walter Benjamin, Raymon Williams, W. E. B. Dubois and Michel de Certeau. Hence, language is not

regarded purely as a “transparent” vehicle by which information is communicated, but rather its use encompasses and encapsulates contexts and complex social, political, cognitive, and linguistic processes, whereby meaning-making involves multi-level activities.

Based on the knowledge of the context and background supplied in the introduction, the authors present major constructs for the microethnographic approach adopted in the book in their study of classroom language and literacy events in Chapter 1, “Microethnographic Approach to the Discourse Analysis of Classroom Language and Literacy Events”, which runs 49 pages. They attempt to give special attention to the role of language as “a primary tool in creating and negotiating everyday life” (p. 2). Following this framing, they discuss two key issues essential, in the authors’ opinion, to the analysis of language and literacy events in classrooms. They are referred to as implied personhood and the foregrounding of events. The former includes assumptions shared by the participants in the events about the features and attributes inherent in a person. Therefore, how a culture defines a person is closely related to a myriad of issues such as morality, cognition, social structure and social interaction, rationality, sanity and insanity, among others. This is tantamount to saying that one’s personhood is socially constructed and the situatedness of such a construct is in place, excluding the precept that it is predetermined. The latter specifically gives emphasis on the importance of classroom language and literacy practices as social events. Then they present their five theoretical tools for the microethnographic analysis of classroom language and literacy events. The five tools are: a) contextualization cues, which include verbal, nonverbal and prosodic signals and the manipulation of artefacts; b) boundary making, which involves making a decision on where a text ends and another begins; c) turn-taking, which is very important to successful and meaningful interaction, especially that, e.g., as defined in the work of Au (1980); d) negotiating thematic coherence, which concerns the organization of meanings obtainable throughout particular events, where the meanings may be ideational, interpersonal or textual; and e) intertextuality that is the juxtaposition of texts. After all the theoretical and methodological constructs are presented, the authors “locate” their own approach to discourse analysis in “Linguistic Turn”, which they view as related to how uses and forms of language create and recreate knowledge, power relations, identities, and so on. This is based on their recognition that language is not transparent, as briefly mentioned in the Introduction as well. By doing so, they ground their approach to discourse analysis naturally in the “linguistic turn” as is the case in many other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities (Allen, 2000; Said, 1979). In simple terms, they “ask who is doing what, to whom, where, and how through the use of language in classrooms” (p. 49) and they ask that of themselves and teachers as well as their students.

As a close follow up to Chapter 1, Chapter 2, “Microethnographic Approach to the Discourse Analysis of Cultural Practices in Classroom Language and Literacy Events”, discusses the use of microethnographic approaches to discourse analysis for describing language and literacy events as cultural action. They highlight methodological issues thus involved. As methodological discussions are not separate from theories underpinning the adoption of particular methodologies targeted at describing and analyzing the phenomena, they examine three major sets of issues: a) the extant set of theories; b) the set of theories that guide the specific approach to discourse analysis being used; and c) the implicit theories embedded in the classroom event. In light of these three sets of issues, they discuss the view that classroom language and literacy events are sites of cultural practices. Then they look at possible issues in the microethnographic description of school literacy practices, observing that classrooms are not merely physical contexts for the enactment of literacy practices. They resonate with Street (2003) and Street and Street (1991: 163) that language as used in the classroom is objectified, procedures are emphasized and uses of written language are homogenized, and *pedagoginization of literacy* will result. This is really an important concern in the area of language studies as is also highlighted, for example, by Reagan (2004). However, they maintain that a classroom literacy practice can go beyond the classroom itself and it cannot be assumed *a priori*. Another important issue they discuss is the difficulties and dangers involved in the discourse analysis of classroom literacy events when the two concepts *structure* and *substance* are not fully understood. The authors discount the prevalent practice of analyzing classroom literacy events that focuses on the structure of turn-taking in student-teacher interaction (i.e., the sequence of IRE – initiation, response and evaluation). While acknowledging the important implications those structures might have, they argue that examining how language is used by whom, for what purpose, when, where and what “*import*” language use would have to people in the literacy events and “to the conduct and interpretation of other events” (p. 56) should be given more attention. This is made possible within a microethnographic approach to discourse analysis. Sufficient examples and data are furnished to explicate these arguments presented in the chapter (pp. 60-90). They

summarize that the location of knowledge *per se* does not constitute continuity or change in a classroom literacy practice but rather the location of knowledge invoked within an interactional structure is.

Chapter 3, “Microethnographic Discourse Analysis and the Exploration of Social Identity in Classroom Language and Literacy Events”, takes the construction of social identity in classroom literacy events as the major thrust of discussion. The authors explain that social identities are not fixed, predetermined or stable. Instead, they are subtle, situated and dynamic social relations. Hence, this chapter presents data that are analyzed and interpreted in relation to the main constructs explained in this and previous chapters. In the first round of theoretical discussion, they look at social identity as appellation and process, where membership is indicated in relation to cultural ideologies. The authors point out the difficulty in treating social identity fundamentally as appellation due to the fact that in doing so one tends to “obfuscate the social processes involved in the production, evolution, and use of social identity” (p.104). They argue that it is through the use of language that people name, construct, contest and negotiate social identities; viz., the process of social identity-building is one of language processes. In connection with social identities are three methodological issues that the authors focus on: a) the movement from “givens” of social identity appellations as expressed in social theories to the processes of face-to-face interaction, and vice versa; b) identification of the discourse processes; and c) capturing, describing, and labelling social identities as they evolve within an event. They argue that there are two dynamics that can distinguish “given” social identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, and class from identities of other kinds such as friend, poor reader, problem learner, etc. These two dynamics respectively refer to the “ubiquity and homogeneity of the categories of race, gender, ethnicity and class” and “the vehemence with which the categories of race, gender, ethnicity, and class are maintained and the sense of permanence” (p. 106). They also argue that there has been resistance to these categories which are evolving as a result of such resistance to how these categories are defined. In their ensuing theoretical discussion on social identity as appellation and process, the discursive relationship of theory, method and findings in the conduct of discourse analysis is further expounded. The authors maintain that the appellation of social identity and the processes involved in the constructing of social identities are closely tied. Methodological approaches associated with the constructs of intertextuality, intercontextuality, and interdiscursivity are recommended being able to provide useful ways to explore how interpersonal events at the micro level contribute to given categories of social identity at the macro level. Large amounts of data are provided to illuminate these issues throughout the chapter.

Chapter 4, “Microethnographic Approach to the Discourse Analysis and the Exploration of Power Relations in Classroom Language and Literacy Events”, looks at how power is exhibited in the process of learning. The authors try to show multiple ways to approach the analysis of power relations by examining the potential benefits of microethnographic discourse analysis. They present three models of power: power as product, power as process, and power as caring relations. Based on the models they discuss power relations in connection with classroom language and literacy events, especially the perspective of power as caring relations. Their adoption of a reflexive stance in the analysis of power relations provides the backdrop where their studies conducted in the classrooms of the 6th-graders and the 7th-graders are reported. They also compare the perspectives in research methodologies and the advantages of *emic* vs. *etic* in researcher stance are also explained. They conclude the chapter by saying that microethnographic discourse analysis offers another avenue to examining some of the intricate power relations related to knowledge and power at play in learning literacy skills in classrooms.

The relationship between microethnographic discourse analysis studies of classroom language and literacy events with other lines of inquiry is the focus of Chapter 5, “Locating microethnographic Discourse Analysis of Classroom Language and Literacy Events and the Research Imagination”. Reiterating the focus of their discussion within the “New Literacy Studies”, whose approach to research foregrounds anthropological and sociolinguistic methods, the authors heed issues of cultural, political and economic ideology. It is within this broad understanding that the authors claim that their microethnographic approach to discourse analysis in language and literacy events share what Street labels an *ideological model* of literacy; i.e., literacy is not regarded as a set of autonomous cognitive and linguistic skills, but rather as a set of social and cultural practices embedded in larger and broader social, cultural and political processes (see also Luke, 2004). Therefore, the authors focus on the process involved in the relationship between research studies and perspectives, which they give the label “locating”. Thus the attempt to locate the approach to microethnographic discourse analysis can be made step-by-step in order to satisfy the conditions. They argue that “the process of locating a study is ongoing, constantly being negotiated and renegotiated, such that it is perhaps more accurate to consider multiple locations rather than a single location and to review any

location as temporary ... no study has a determinate meaning” (p. 242). Although this chapter is supposed to conclude the whole book, the authors also try to spell out certain theoretical and research issues here, for example, an assimilationist approach and a dialogic approach to building relationships among research perspectives. They also point out the direction for future research.

By grounding it in recent theories such as the sociology of language (sociolinguistics), literacy theory, social anthropology, critical discourse analysis and especially the “New Literacy Studies”, *Discourse Analysis and the Study of Classroom Language and Literacy Events* is a valuable contribution to the field of applied linguistics in general and discourse analysis and literacy research in particular. It presents a social linguistic/social interactional approach to the discourse analysis of classroom language and literacy events and describes a microethnographic approach to discourse analysis that provides a reflexive and recursive research process which continually questions what counts as knowledge in and of the interactions among teachers and students. The data-driven and theoretically-oriented development of the chapters help the authors to reiterate their argument for recursive and situated application of theoretical constructs, and by demonstrating how such a situated application works with a variety of topics, the authors create an ambiance that facilitates smooth reading of the text. The focus of attention is on actual people in the classroom “acting and reacting to each other” (p. xvii). The book is worth reading also because it addresses one of the important contributions of the microethnographic approach; namely, it highlights the conception of people as complex, multi-dimensional actors who together use what is given by culture, language, social, and economic capital to create new meanings, social relationships and possibilities, and to recreate culture and language. It also highlights the fact that interaction is complex, ambiguous, indeterminate, often involving issues of social identity, power relations and broad social and cultural processes. The approach that the authors use throughout the book treats methodological, theoretical, and epistemological issues in a well united and systematic manner. They argue that research always involves a dialectical relationship among the object of the research, the theoretical frameworks and methodologies driving the research, and the situations within which the research is conducted. As the authors posit, it is no longer fair to “simply characterize and caricaturize people, teachers, and students as powerful or powerless, as independent variables subject to the mediate circumstances of some ethereal macro level social force or as independent factors whose efforts are simply the result of autonomous developmental and cognitive processes” (p. 231). They also caution that literacy learning is no longer as simple a business as empowering or disempowering people; instead, as a series of classroom events literacy learning involves a complex inter-relationship where teachers, students, and language use are intertwined in various ways in embodying power relations that are constructed, reconstructed, transformed, resisted, adapted, maintained, destabilized and defenestrated by all the participants within and across particular social and political contexts. The permeation of power relations does not guarantee defining such language and literacy events in the classroom by the “single dimension of power” (p. 232). Instead, the very fact that teaching literacy skills is much a matter of language socialization, acculturation/ enculturalization, identity production, power relations and situated interaction requires that researchers and teachers think about language and literacy events in relation to issues of cultural appropriation and cultural responsiveness (e.g., Gay, 2000; Kramsch, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In addition to its contribution to the expanding field of literacy studies and the field of situated critical discourse analysis in language and literacy classrooms, the value of the book to the field of applied linguistics is prominent, as critical applied linguistics and critical pedagogies in second and foreign language education have also emerged as important arenas of disciplinary inquiry (e.g., Luke, 2004; Norton & Toohy, 2004; Pennycook, 2001). In particular, the microethnographic approach used in the book will be exemplary to beginning researchers, research students and whoever interested in the complex issues in language and literacy research. Except for some typographical and editorial inattentiveness (e.g., several references are missing in several sections), which, to me, is just a minor gripe and does not actually affect coherent reading and the typos can be rectified in the next edition, the book is worth recommending to anyone who is interested in literacy as complex webs of human activities, or one who is thinking about embarking on a research project of this kind.

If this book is of interest to classroom teachers, I anticipate that the book will be of more appeal to those who teach English as a mother tongue or first language in schools than to those who teach English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL). However, I also anticipate that both groups of teachers will be able to garner new insight into their own practices if they attempt to read it. It is when they flip through the pages that they will be able to find echoing voices in many of the data sets resurfaced in the book. These classroom language and literacy events might be able to offer them chances to reflect

critically on their own practices by looking at how researchers frame and interpret these events that are closely related to many other aspects beyond the cognitive dimension of the learner in and outside the classroom.

References

- Allen, G. (2000). *Intertextuality*. New York: Routledge.
- Au, K. (1980). Participation structures in a reading lesson with Hawaiian children: Analysis of a culturally appropriate instructional event. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 11(2), 91-115.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gee, J. P. (1999). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*. New York: Routledge.
- Gee, J. P. (2000). The New Literacy Studies: From “socially situated” to the work of the social. In D. Barton, M. Hamilton, & R. Ivanic (Eds.), *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context* (pp. 180-196). London: Routledge.
- Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(4), 465-491.
- Luke, A. (2003). Literacy and the other: A sociological approach to literacy research and policy in multilingual societies. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 38(1), 132-141.
- Luke, A. (2004). Two takes on the critical. In B. Norton & K. Toohey (Eds.), *Critical pedagogies and language learning* (pp. 21-29). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 60-92.
- Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (Eds.). (2004). *Critical pedagogies and language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pennycook, A. (2001). *Critical applied linguistics: A critical introduction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Reagan, T. (2004). Objectification, positivism and language studies: A reconsideration. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 1(1), 41-60.
- Said, E. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage.
- Street, B. (2003). What’s “new” in New Literacy Studies? Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 5(2), 1-14.
- Street, B., & Street, J. (1991). The schooling of literacy. In D. Barton & R. Ivanic (Eds.), *Writing in community* (pp. 143-166). London: Sage.

Lawrence Jun Zhang (PhD) is an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics and Teacher Education. As Coordinator of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education Programme for Secondary English Language Teachers at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, he teaches Language Studies, Second Language Acquisition, Psycholinguistics and Reading Methods, and supervises graduate students’ dissertations. His current research interest lies mainly in language teacher education, especially preservice reading teacher preparation, and literacy instruction in secondary schools. His work has appeared or is to appear in international journals including *Asia Pacific Journal of Language in Education*, *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, *English Today*, *International Journal of Educational Reform*, *ITL Review of Applied Linguistics*, *Language and Education*, *Language Awareness*, *RELC Journal*, and *System*.