Abstract

Taking into account the growing diverse student body in increasingly interactive classrooms, it is crucial to enhance our understanding of the dynamics of mixed multicultural groups, and in this particular case, the oral participation and group experiences of Chinese multilingual speakers. Following scholarships from critical pedagogy, intersectionality, and language as symbolic capital, this thesis research project examines the beliefs, interactions and struggles of eight Chinese multilingual speakers in their group discussions in lower-division and upper-division courses in a middle-size western university.

Using ethnographic methods, participant observation and interviewing in particular, the researcher followed and observed how eight Chinese multilingual speakers, with various English proficiencies and diverse learning cultures, participated and performed in their group discussions. Video-recordings, audio-recordings, course syllabus, lecture slides, marking rubrics, students’ writing samples and peer review forms were the main sources of data.

The investigation and comparison of participants’ group experiences show that institutional structures, such as curriculum, grading policies, ideologies, and stereotypical biases could play a crucial role affecting participants’ oral participation and performances in their groups. Informed by scholarship in critical pedagogy and Bourdieu’s language as symbolic capital, the researcher argued that some discursive structures in educational settings could largely disadvantage multilingual speakers especially those who newly arrived in North America, and cause challenges for them to participate effectively in their group projects. It is, thus, important for university educators to be aware of the power imbalances as well as the power struggles between different social groups in doing group projects. At the end of the paper, the researcher provides some practical suggestions for more inclusive practices for instructors.

Keywords: Oral participation; negotiation of positionalities; critical pedagogy; intersectionality; symbolic capital; group dynamics.