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Critical Discourse Analysis of Moderated Discussion Board of Virtual University of Pakistan

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Abstract

The paper critically evaluated the discursive practices on the Moderated Discussion Board (MDB) of Virtual University of Pakistan (VUP). The paramount objective of the study was to conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the MDB on the Learning Management System (LMS) of VUP. For this purpose, the academic power relations of the students and instructors were evaluated by analyzing whose discourse was dominant in communication with each other on MDB. The researcher devised a model based on the blended theoretical framework of Norman Fairclough and Teun van Dijk to critically analyze the linguistics, ideological, semiotic and socio cognitive-cultural undercurrents in the production and reception processes of MDB discourse. The primary data of the MDB of *English Comprehension* (ENG101) course was randomly selected to be qualitatively analyzed for this research study. The findings demonstrated that the learners were at a disadvantage because of their lack of command of the English language. However, quick and pertinent replies from instructors revealed students' empowerment in an educational discursive practice. The results indicated a balance of power relations amongst instructors, students and the University. However, the need to improve the critical thinking of the students to further empower them was strongly felt.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA); Virtual Classroom; Moderated Discussion Board (MDB); Learning Management System (LMS), E-learning

Introduction

There is no progress . . . in how we teach, despite what might be possible with the new technology. (Laurillard, 2002)

Technology has brought a shift in traditional pedagogy. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have revolutionized the concept of a traditional classroom. Terms like electronic learning or virtual learning do not sound strange to people now. Access to the Internet is increasing day by day so much that even mobile phones are now commonly used as web navigators, even in the third world countries. The Internet is no more used only for search- navigation; rather it has popularized a/synchronous social networking which has become a part of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) too (Anneta, Cheng & Holmes, 2010). Online or electronic learning refers to the process that involves learning and teaching via the Internet and information and communication technologies. Online learning environments are used not only to access learning materials and required information, but also for interaction and collaboration with fellow students and teachers (White, 2003). As interaction is a necessary part of learning, it becomes the defining component of any educational process because it helps students construct into knowledge the information passed on to them from others through scaffolding. Interaction, according to Fowler and Mayes (1999), takes place with concepts, tasks and people. Interaction with *concepts* results in conceptualizing as a result of learner's pre-existing knowledge and an exposure to new ideas. Interaction with *tasks* results in construction by applying the conceptualization to meaningful tasks. Interaction with *people* results in dialogue by creating and testing the conceptualizations through conversation with teachers and fellow students

(Fowler & Mayes, 1999). Discussion boards are all about such interaction. This interaction formulates discourse which takes written shape on discussion boards.

E-learning technologies have developed to the extent that quality teacher–student activities can be supported either among groups or individually, and in either real time (synchronously) or in delayed time (asynchronously). *Synchronous* e-learning examples are video conferencing and electronic white boards, which need simultaneous presence of both students and teachers to be present at the time of content delivery. *Asynchronous* e-learning refers to the learning that takes place through programs and discussion boards that allow students to work through the screens at their own pace and time. Most of the courses available on the Internet are based on an asynchronous model (Greenagel, 2002). All discussion forums like chat boards, etc. are an example of this. Students can be involved in e-learning discussions from various locations, or from the same place and work in groups like in a real time classroom for assignment preparation etc. (Gunasekaran, McNeil & Shaul, 2002). Six possible forms of interaction within e-learning in general and discussion boards in particular are teacher-student, student-student, student-content, teacher-content, teacher-teacher and content-content interaction (Anderson, 2008). Therefore, the discourse is not only shaped by the linguistic exchanges amongst humans, but technological medium also plays an integral role in this regard.

Discourse is a loaded and fluid concept but is always expressed in the form of language, be it oral or written or any other sign system, e.g., paralanguage, visuals, etc. Michel Foucault alludes to the social control over the production and distribution of discourses (Foucault, 1980). James Gee divides discourse into two catagories: 'discourse' with a small 'd' referring to 'language in use', and 'Discourse' with a capital 'D' which is a more comprehensive concept adding the social context, based not only on language but thoughts, feelings, ways of behavior, values, customs, etc., too (Gee, 2007). Discourses are generated out of discursive practices which refer to the rules of the formation of discourses i.e., what to be said where and how, what should be left unsaid, who can speak with authority and who must listen (Foucault, 1980). Discourses are very much a part of educational systems too. Within institutions there can be power/knowledge relationships and dominated discourses exist in the form of established systems (McLaren, 2003). To explore how educational discourses can be rampant with power is the task of critical discourse analysis.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a long-standing but still developing methodological area that studies how power, knowledge, ideologies and social relations are constructed and maintained in a society through the use of verbal and non-verbal language i.e., all signs of communication. CDA looks at the 'context of language use to be crucial to discourse' (Wodak, 2001), and language as a form of social practice (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). It has a particular interest in the association of language to marginalization, oppression, emancipation, and power. It investigates power relations between the oppressor and the oppressed in all walks of life through the discourses they produce. The roots of critical discourse analysis can be traced back to critical theory as propagated by Frankfurt School. The first generation theorists of Frankfurt School, like Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, the enlightenment figures, propagated that any critique should be based on objective reason and contemplation (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Jurgen Habermas considers language a means of social domination due to its potential for legitimizing organized power relations as found in the society (Habermas, 1990). For Habermas, discourse is a blend of social realities and the use of language as a tool for propagating power. The 'critical' of CDA, that differentiates it from any discourse analysis, is all about exploring inequality in power relations in a society manipulated through language and to challenge the oppressors to emancipate the oppressed.

As education is a social process, and nowadays the concept of education goes beyond institutions of brick and mortar, CDA can be used as a tool for critical e-learning as it has the potential to enable

students to explore the intersection of literacy, discourse and politics (Chege, 2009) and struggle against social and political injustices in the field of education and to work for emancipation. E-learning can be a useful tool towards eradication of inequality by providing access to students without any distinction of race, class, economic status and even geographical location. CDA can be very effective in evaluating the discourse produced by students and instructors on discussion boards to dig out the covert messages and agendas underlying their choice of words or nonverbal signs. CDA also helps to critically look at the technological determinism, i.e., shaping of culture and ideologies through dominant technologies in general and in pedagogic practices in particular.

With the aim to critically analyze a discussion board discourse, this case study was conducted on the graduate students of Virtual University of Pakistan. To meet the objectives of the study, Moderated Discussion Board discussions were selected for critical discourse analysis. The MDB is a section of LMS Interface which facilitates the learners to ask queries regarding any difficulties in course content or conceptual barriers. Although CDA has come forward as a major multidisciplinary approach over the past two decades to the study of contexts and texts and some work has also been done about the social networking discussions, not much attention has been paid to academic electronic discussion boards discourse. Much attention needs to be paid to this area to identify the ideologies of either side, as students and teachers are the backbone of any society. Therefore, the MDB of VUP has been analyzed both for its written texts and visual semiotics. Keeping in view the parameters of critical discourse analysis the study explores the nature of power relations, inequality, biases and the ideologies behind them, whether explicit or implicit in the MDB discourse.

Research Questions

The critical discourse analysis of MDB aims to look for the answers of the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of power relations, if any, on MDB? Is the MDB discourse intimidating or non-intimidating, friendly or biased?
2. Does the MDB discourse reveal any implicit or explicit ideologies?
3. Does the MDB discourse transmit or promote stereotypical views that reinforce sexist and patriarchal attitudes, class distinctions and socio-economic inequalities?
4. Does the University reproduce the social relationships and attitudes to sustain the existing economic, class or gender relations of the larger society?
5. Does MDB discourse succeed in developing critical thinking in students resulting in some sort of empowerment?

Literature Review

Language—whether spoken or written—is a powerful tool of communication. Electronic discussion boards exploit the written form of language for communication. The characteristics of electronic discourse, both a/synchronous with particular reference to language use, have attracted critical discourse analysts who have focused on netspeak neologisms, prefixes, compounds, abbreviations as well as the affective use of expressions resulting in discourse conventions (Montero, Watts & García-Carbonell, 2007). The research in the field of second language acquisition through e-learning modes also emphasizes the importance of interactive discussion forums' discourse because of the interactive methodology used, resulting in quick language learning as it helps in assessing the learning process of students (García-Carbonell, Rising, Montero & Watts, 2001) and helps compare face to face and online interactive learning. However, little has been published on the power relations

amongst online students, instructors and the institutions. As asynchronous online discussion forums are not oral and mostly written; the comparison cannot be easily drawn. However, they have their own informal ways of communication which has been called 'second orality' by Ong (Wilson, 2001). This informality due to digitization becomes a subject of critical discourse analysis. The works of Fairclough highlight such "mixtures of formal and informal styles, technical and non-technical vocabularies", which are "markers of authority and familiarity" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 79), and result in the processes of 'informalization' or 'conversationalization' and technologization of discourse. According to Kern (1995), asynchronous discourse can be considered an informal hybrid of oral and written communication and acts as a bridge between written and spoken skills for learners.

Critical discourse analysis is used to examine texts critically to ransack traces of power, dominance, inequality and bias. This analysis is based on the exploration of the maintenance and reproduction of discursive practices in specific socio-political and historical contexts (van Dijk, 1998). This exploration is systematic and dissects opaque discursive relationships of causality and determination in socio-cultural textual processes (Fairclough, 1993). Fairclough offers a three-part framework for critically analyzing a communicative act i.e., text (micro), discourse (meso) and sociocultural (macro) interpretation (Fairclough, 1995). Fairclough views text from multifunctional points of view analyzing its functions as representations, relations and identities. Discourse practices are the processes through which a text gets its final shape, be it production process or changes brought by consumption (Figure 1).
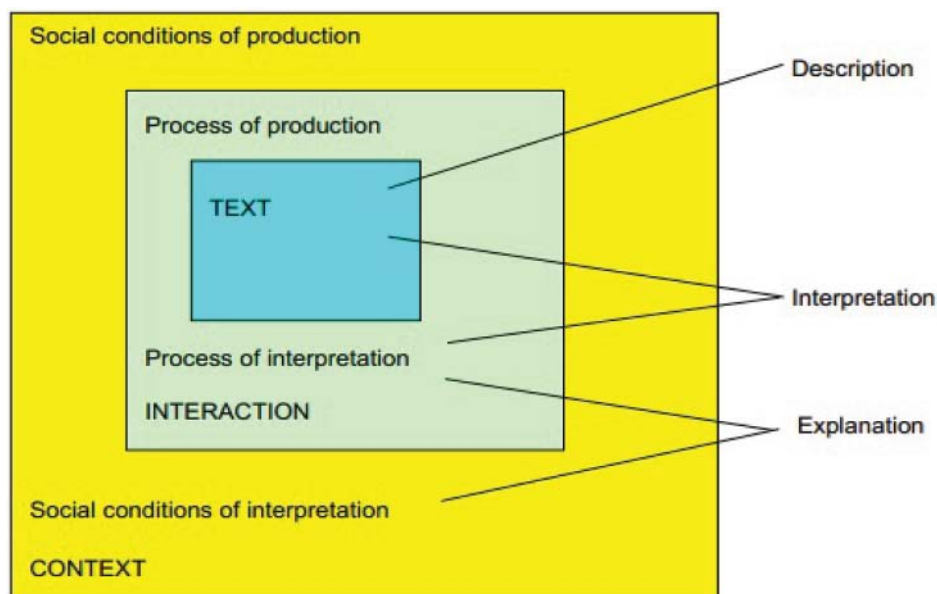
Figure 1: Discourse as text, interaction and context (after Fairclough, 1989; Thompson, 2005)

In text and discourse analysis, Fairclough pays special heed to intertextuality, which develops a borderline between text and discourse (Fairclough, 1995). Intertextual analysis is different from linguistic one as it is more interpretative in comparison to the descriptive nature of the text. Intertextuality is the text's overlapping whether manifest or constitutive (Fairclough, 1992). The sociocultural critical discourse analysis of Fairclough refers to the dissemination of economic, political or cultural sediments in any discursive event either singly or altogether.

Van Dijk is one of the most important CDA practitioners as far as media discourse is concerned because he has the credit to integrate general discourse principles to media texts by focusing on the analysis of production and reception processes. His production process refers to the journalistic

and institutional processes for meaning making based on their economic interests and social agendas. Reception processes include the understanding, retention and reproduction of news (in our case MDB question answers). His structure, production and comprehension model works on the micro and macrostructure levels. Microstructure focuses on semantic and rhetoric levels and macrostructure on overall thematic schemata (van Dijk, 1993, 1998). His superstructure schemata include the headline, story and consequence analysis (van Dijk, 1998), whereas his ideology analysis caters social, cognitive and discourse analysis including non-verbal semiotic clues (van Dijk, 1995a).

The recent study focuses on the CDA of a virtual classroom discussion board. The study of computer-mediated discourse has become quite a concern in our times. The interaction in a virtual classroom can be a complicated phenomenon to be investigated because of the diversity of students in terms of age, locality, culture, etc. However, this very diversity calls for CDA of online discourse. One can explore the presence of social clues in students' online discourse by looking at the cognitive and metacognitive components of the messages (Hara, Bonk & Angeli, 2000).

The need of cognitive presence in online learning is important because only interaction is not enough and the design, structure and the leadership in form of the instructor can have a deep impact on students' learning (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). The role of the instructor remains very significant in discussion board discursive practices. The teachers can not only inspire students for meaningful learning through discussions (Bender, 2003), they can also move beyond their roles as 'sage on stage' or 'guide on the side' to 'the ghost in the wings' to enhance critical thinking (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003). The teacher-student and student-student interaction results in a sense of community (Poole, 2000). However, interactivity should be based on an inquiry model (Swan, 2001). Dahlberg (2001) compares Habermas' requirements of public sphere with online discourse. He states the need of developing deliberate spaces on the Internet to expand public sphere for public deliberations.

Patient Rambe (2012) explores the relationship between students, teachers and university administration by employing CDA on the discourse generated by their interaction on Facebook. As Facebook is a social networking site, it provides an interactional space even for academic purposes, and Rambe explores the relational power and social learning underneath the discourses. His findings affirm the existence of authoritative discourse. The same sort of power relations can be explored in academic discussion boards by exploring the nature of social presence (Swan & Shih, 2005).

Whereas Rambe refers to students' imagined powerlessness on discussion boards (Rambe, 2012), Becker, Greer and Hughes (1995) explore the need to study students' personal views of their experiences in online discussion boards to find out the outcomes of student behavior the academicians can be interested in. "If we do not see it as they do, we will not understand what they do" (p. 2). According to Swales (1990), the key purpose of a discourse community is to share information clashes, if there are any, with some of these purposes, as many of the learners rely on discussion boards for information sharing rather than stimulating support. Discussion boards can stimulate learning if the students feel powerful, but if they feel powerless the learning may get affected due to affective barriers in communication. The affective barrier can be a result of manipulative discourse. Discourse becomes manipulative when the intentions of the writer are not obvious to the reader and they fail to understand the real intentions of the manipulator (van Dijk, 2006). All the same, this is frequently the case, particularly when the respondents don't have the specific knowledge that might be applied to resist manipulation (Wodak, 1987). In Pakistani scenario, the learners of English language do not have a command on English language and they are very much dependent on their instructors in their interactions. The barrier of language can make it difficult for them to understand manipulations, if any.

It has been observed that students rarely engage in the communication processes (in face to face learning in general and online learning in particular) that comprise critical discourse, and even if they try to do so very rarely, they fail to achieve the desired results (Veerman, Andriessen, & Kanselaar, 2000). After its introduction to virtual mode of educational settings in 1980s, there have been permanent questions about the most excellent way to use this communication technology for education. Becker *et al*. (1995) recommend that "an understanding of the students' experiences would provide insight into the lack of online critical discourse that is widely documented throughout the literature." The social and emotional presence of the students as real people in academic discussion boards is not ample (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). The use of detailed signatures can provide students a sense of identity and the use of emoticons a more human atmosphere. The cognition of teaching presence is also at serious risk if the students are not familiar with the teacher identity and vice versa. Interestingly, both teachers and students are more familiar with the technology used than the human beings on the other end.

Papacharissi (2004) highlights the dire need of creating democracy through online discourse for increasing political participation which can eventually lead to a democratic utopia. The discourse must remain civil even in heated discussions. He refers to Lyotard's vision of democratic emancipation achieved through disagreement and even anarchy where required. Similarly, the academic discussion boards online can level all inequalities if students raise their voice for their rights.

Method

For this qualitative study, primary data from Virtual University of Pakistan Moderated Discussion Board was utilized. The MDB text was investigated by applying the critical discourse analysis method. For this purpose, only one of the English courses was selected i.e. *English Comprehension* (Eng 101), which is a basic English language skills improvement course. Out of many postings on Spring and Fall 2014 MDB, only five were randomly selected for convenience of analysis and to avoid repetition. Moreover, the interface screenshots (Figures 3 to 7) have been pasted as they are, without hiding identities because gender bias was a part of the analysis. Keeping in mind the ethical issues, the permission was sought from the respective instructors whose name was to be revealed. The interpretation has been drawn in the form of tables.

Based on Fairclough and van Dijk's ideas on CDA, a new model was formed by the researcher as a rubric for the CDA of the MDB (Figure 2).

Virtual University MDB is a text itself with the context of e-learning i.e., technology as a medium of communication, thus each MDB becomes a communicative event (Fairclough approach) which definitely has social context in terms of academic power relations among student, teacher and institution. Each MDB has a superstructure (van Dijk approach) with its address, text, semantic, structural and semiotic features. Thus the Virtual University MDB forum can be seen as a "system of mental representations and processes of group members" (van Dijk, 1995b, p. 18). Through the given model (Figure 2), it will be analyzed whether VU MDB discourse can control or shape thinking of the students/instructors resulting in some sort of ideology formation, changing the previous ideologies.

Based on Fairclough's first dimension out of his three dimensional framework for CDA, the researcher analyzed the *linguistic elements* of the MDB discourse by looking at the semantic and lexico-grammatical aspects of the text which have mutual impact on each other (Fairclough, 1995). The coherence, direct or indirect modes of asking or replying, the thematic structure with the topic, main argument, premises etc were also analyzed. Fairclough considers linguistic analysis to be descriptive in nature whereas the interpretive task is that of intertextuality (Fairclough, 1995). Therefore, the researcher also looked for intertextual clues in the MDB discourse.
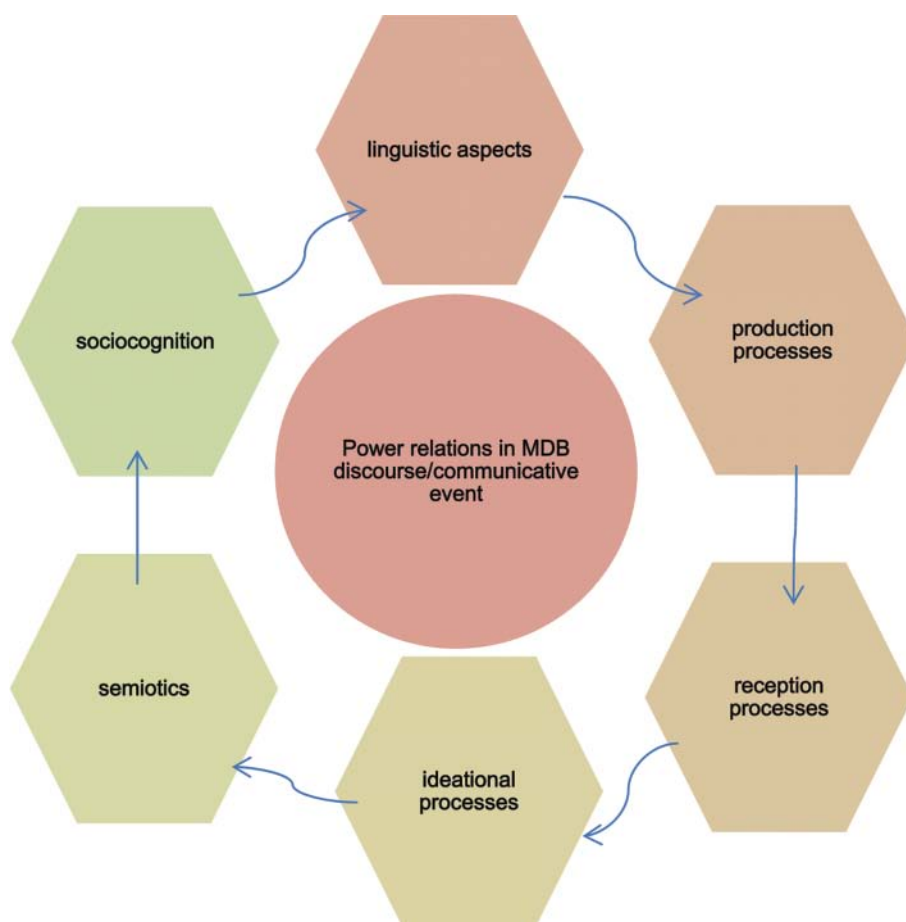
Figure 2: Model for Analyzing MDB Discourse

Based on van Dijk's concept of *production process* and Fairclough's institutional process, the researcher explored the institutional process of MDB development by focusing on its purpose, process of asking and answering questions. The rationale of the production of questions from students and replies by instructors was also analyzed.

By *reception process* van Dijk means how news are received, understood, retained in memory and finally reproduced by the masses. The researcher looked at how a question was received/perceived by the instructor and the reply by the students respectively, analyzing attitude, comprehension, memorization and reproduction, if any. The researcher also tried to analyze, based on Fairclough's reception studies, the process of meaning making and the role of the University in the production of discourse.

The *ideational process* was analyzed tracing any ideologies either explicit or implicit in the MDB text on both ends. According to Fairclough, every text represents and recontextualises some social practice. This he calls the ideational function of text because text carries certain ideologies. Text constructs the identities of writers and readers based on status, role and individual aspects of identity leading to a construction of relationship between writer and reader (Fairclough, 1995). The researcher looked at all these aspects of student-teacher ideologies and identities. Whether any ideology was present or not was also taken into consideration.

As MDB communicative act takes place through written communication, the *semiotic analysis* explored the spaces, presentation of texts and visuals of the MDB interface to analyze the innate

ideologies, if any, of the students and Instructors. Van Dijk considers discourse analysis as ideology analysis itself as ideologies are not only expressed in verbal discourse but also in nonverbal semiotic clues (van Dijk 1998). The researcher analyzed all semiotic signs for tracing instructor-student power relations. The proxemics i.e. the use of space on the MDB was given special attention along with paralanguage expressions if any.

Van Dijk blends social cognition and personal cognition and calls it *sociocognition* (van Dijk, 1995a). For him, ideologies are socially constructed and become a mental system based on shared attitudes of individuals. Thus the personal cognition of any individual is directly affected. The researcher analyzed the context of discourse in this section by analysing power relations and/or any conflicts involved. Fairclough calls it sociocultural aspect and pays heed to the presence or absence of values, the third dimension of his CDA framework. How are the socially dominant roles manifested in MDB discourse also remained a subject of study.

The CDA model works in a hermeneutics way i.e., every parts of the discourse should be interpreted in relation to its whole but the whole must be understood in the context of its constitutive parts. The linguistic aspect is directly linked to production which triggers reception and connects the linguistic aspect to ideational, semiotic and finally the socio-cultural cognitive aspects. Thus overall, the academic power relations will be critically analyzed following the model given above.

Results

Five MDB posts were analyzed in a table form according to the model devised by the researcher (Figure 2). Each MDB screenshot (Figures 3 to 7) is followed by a table of analysis (Tables 1 to 5).

Figure 3: MDB Discourse 1

Table 1: Analysis of MDB Discourse 1

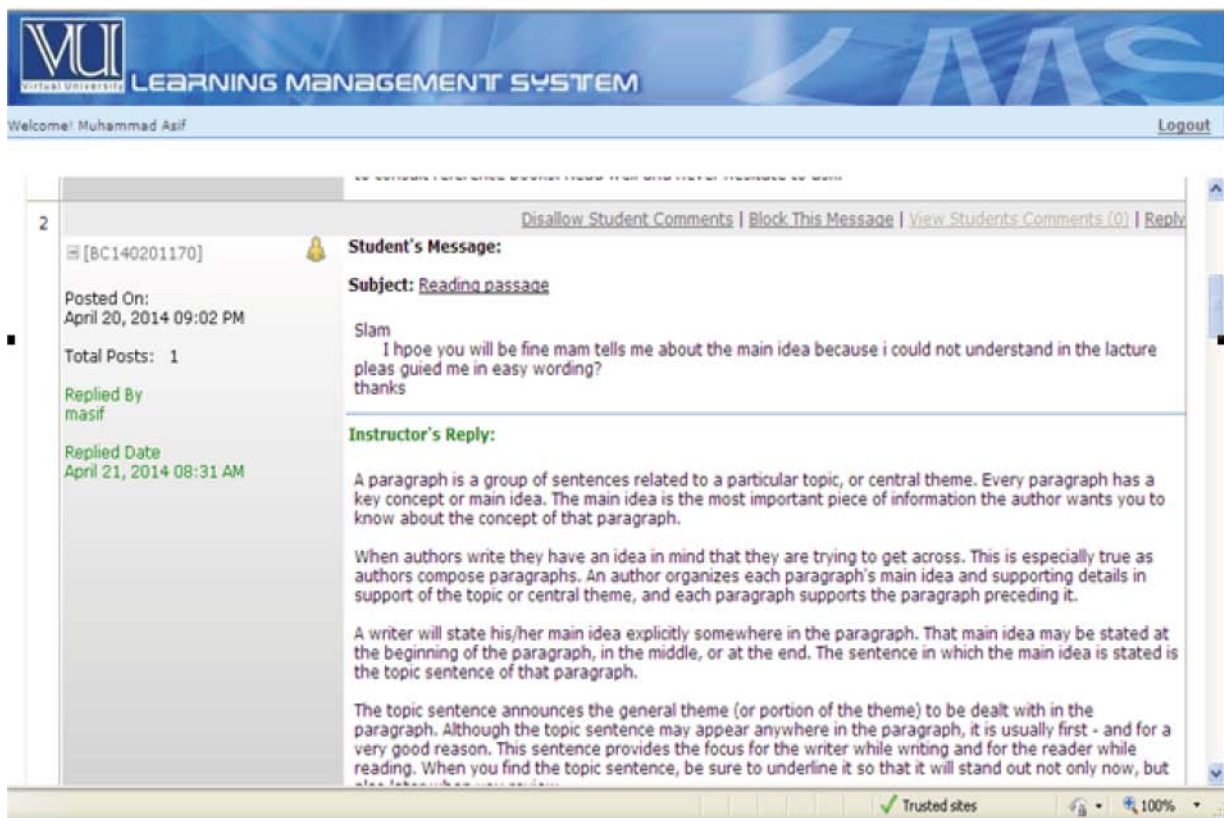|	
Linguistic Analysis	The student has tried to follow a proper format for his question by placing a proper address, salutation and question body. This shows his/her attempt to be formal. However, the use of words like "i", "u' shows student's comfort with chat language. Student's comfort with chat language shows the dominance of technological innovations over language in particular and society in general, as it is an unconcious expression on part of the student rather being a conscious informality in his/her expression. Therefore, technological determinism is present. The instructor's reply is formal but she fails to use standard English constructions herself e.g., "it might happened" instead of "it might have happened". The instructor seems to be replying in a hurry or flow and is negligent that a wrong expression can hinder the accurate second language learning of the student.
Production/Reception Processes	The production of discourse at the end of the student is based on genuine need i.e., missing paragraphs in handouts. As a result the student fails to relate handouts to video lectures. The student seems to be keenly following the video lectures as well as studying handouts. The reception on the end of the Instructor is quite positive. The template is provided by the VUP with an aim to facilitate students for asking any lecture-related questions. Certain checks and balances are University policy to avoid deviances. This is why, it is called the moderated discussion board as the instructor has the option to block any offensive messages. The instructor is supposed to comprehend, research and then reply to the questions. The instructor has the facility to edit his/her response before posting the reply. The student also has the same facility, but once his/her answer is posted, it cannot be edited. Like most chatrooms/discussion boards the admin i.e., institution is in a powerful position because of the formal procedures.
Ideational Processes	The student considers it his/her right to be facilitated and the instructor is ready to facilitate. The student, however, does not have the formal facility to post his/her name, so his roll number remains his identity. The instructor on the other hand posts with her name. The feeling of a 'nobody' may exist on the end of the student.
Semiotic Analysis	This MDB mainly contains linguistic elements. The nonverbal clue is the use of space only that shows student's organized and confident stance. The visuals have a decent organizational look as the use of blue color is common in educational templates. The combination of blue white and gray has an unassuming look and does not have an intimidating effect.
Socio-Cognitive Analysis & Power Relations Between Student/Instructor/ University	The Instructor has the power to answer, but the student has the power to ask and if the student is not satisfied s/he can ask again and again. The student seems satisfied with the answer as no query in continuation has been posted. The instructor has the power to block, if any abusive material is sent. Overall the student is less shy to be expressive because of the distant and non face to face mode. Also the facility of availing as much time as s/he wants to write and edit the question makes the students more powerful. The instructors are supposed to reply as early as possible as per University guidelines. However, in the triad of the three the Institution remains the most powerful as the policy maker.

Figure 4: MDB Discourse 2

Table 2: Analysis of MDB Discourse 2

Linguistic Analysis	The language of the student is full of errors, spellings e.g., "pleas" as well as grammatical e.g., "tells". There are punctuation mistakes of capitalization e.g., "i" and missing commas. His skills in English language need a lot of improvement. However, the question has been posed in a formal order with a salutation, body and closing. Considering the need of improvement, the instructor has given an elaborate reply to the student.
Production/Reception Process	The reply is by a male Instructor "Mr Asif" but the student's address to "mam" is interesting. As the video lectures of Eng 101 have been delivered by Dr Surraya Shafi Mir, the student thinks she'll be on the answering end. The student is not well informed about the processes of the virtual system of the university s/he is enrolled in, which weakens his/her position. The sense of humour is missing in the answer and the reply is formal. The impact on student will be that of a highly formal atmosphere.
Ideational Processes	The use of the word 'slam' shows the Muslim identity of the student and his/her preference to use Islamic way of salutation. However, the instructor, as per university policy, has replied without any salutation to avoid controversies. The student does not use signature, which reveals that s/he is not assertive about his/her personal identity and is satisfied with the roll number identity.

Semiotic Analysis	This post mainly contains linguistic signs. The nonverbal clue is the use of space only that shows student's organized and confident stance. However, the instructor uses ample space which can be interpreted as his facilitating attitude towards the student, but also implies that he is the authoritative source of information. The MDB template does not support the use of emoticons which can render a friendly effect to the discourse.
Socio-Cognitive Analysis & Power Relations Between Student/Instructor/ University	The instructor's detailed reply shows a very responsible and caring attitude and makes the student appear powerful in the sense that s/he is getting his/her rights as far as knowledge seeking is concerned. This is obvious as the student does not ask another question. The University policy of facilitating students as much as possible is also obvious.

Figure 5: MDB Discourse 3

Table 3: Analysis of MDB Discourse 3

Linguistic Analysis	The student has written "Question #1" as the subject. He is not clear about what to write as a subject. The student's English language skills need a lot of improvement as there is no coherence in use. The first person pronoun 'I' has been used once as a small letter and once as capital. A question mark is not put after "how are you" nor the 'h' of 'how' has been capitalized. However, chat language has not been used. The instructor's reply is different in comparison to the previous two MDB posts. He puts a salutation and closing remark 'take care'. This instructor maintains his individuality and his reply seems more encouraging and intimate in a distance e-learning environment. However, the instructor's reply is closer to the spoken English informal style.
Production/Reception Processes	The student's need to ask the question arises out of his lack of command of the English language and the communication gap s/he experiences as a result. The lectures of ENG 101 are delivered in English language altogether and the student is requesting for a bilingual mode. The friendly tone of the instructor shows a positive reception end. He politely guides the student top use dictionary instead. The friendly tone can have a very encouraging impact on the student which can result in better learning. Although the instructor is bound by the limitations of the MDB interface, he made better use of space by adding salutation and concluding friendly remark. It seems that the University does not bind them to follow a particular format for replying and instructors do have their academic space. If the emoticons were a part of the MDB interface, it seems that this Instructor must have used them to keep the academic discussion's impact more comfortable.
Ideational Processes	The use of the word 'salam' (here with different spellings in comparison to previous 'slam' of second MDB) shows the Muslim identity of the student and his/her preference to use Islamic way of salutation. However, the instructor replies with the address "Dear Student" to avoid showing any ideological tilt.
Semiotic Analysis	The nonverbal clue is the use of space only that shows student's organized and confident stance. However, the instructor uses more space here which can be interpreted as his facilitating attitude towards the student but also implies that he is the authoritative source of information.
Socio-Cognitive Analysis & Power Relations Between Student/Instructor/ University	The question asked by the student is very interesting. He has a problem with English medium of instruction and wants to be taught in a bilingual mode. The instructor seems helpless as he has not taught the course himself, and may not be involved in the policy making of teaching English courses. His answer is that an English course is supposed to be taught in English language. This can either be his personal ideology or University policy. This question addresses a dilemma most of the students and teachers seem caught in Pakistan. What is the policy of English teaching? The question unfolds a lot of power relations hidden underneath be it student-instructor-university or cultural imperialism of the English language. Why teach English in English language remains the debate. The student may not be satisfied with the answer and the instructor does not even know whether he is confident of his answer and can justify it, if further investigated. oHowever, the answer can shape the ideology of the student that 'English is taught in English language.'

Figure 6: MDB Discourse 4

Table 4: Analysis of MDB Discourse 4

Linguistic/Structural Analysis	The student has written "Question #1" as the subject. He is not clear about what to write as a subject. The question has been asked in Roman Urdu. The student's English writing skills are either not good or he is not comfortable as he writes a phrase in English at the end 'kindly guide me' and 'with best wishes'. The instructor is not at all indifferent. He guides the student properly with proper address and 'take care' at the end. The tone is intimate.
	English language seems to be a barrier in communication for the student but he breaks the barrier and asks the question in Urdu language. Certain checks and balances are university policy to avoid deviances. However, the Instructor does not discourage the student from asking questions in Roman Urdu. On the one hand, the students is facilitated as much as possible; on the other hand no university policy is highlighted here. The use of national language has not been discouraged. The instructor has the facility to edit his/her response before posting the reply. The student also has the same facility, but once his/her answer is posted, it cannot be edited. Like most chatrooms/discussion boards the admin is in a powerful position.
Ideational Processes	The student uses his full name/signature along with the roll number, so he is conscious about his identity. His use of Urdu language also asserts his rootedness in his local identity. The instructor does not discourage the use of Urdu language. Either the university policy is bypassed or the instructor seems to be in a powerful position of maintaining his ideology.

Semiotic Analysis	The nonverbal clue is the use of space and visuals only. Student's balanced use of space shows his organized and confident stance.
Socio-Cognitive Analysis & Power Relations Between Student/Instructor/ University	The question asked by the student is very interesting. He is conscious about his marks and will only participate in discussion board if it is graded. The instructor's reply establishes the fact that the students have certain facilities and they are quite empowered to make use of those facilities. They are not misguided.

Figure 7: MDB Discourse 5

Table 5: Analysis of MDB Discourse 5

Linguistic Analysis	The language of the student is a combination of formal and informal language. She has written a proper subject that gives the instructor clear idea about the question. The question is a proper statement, but the first letter of 'respected' is not capital. The use of 'u' instead of 'you' shows chat language dominance. The use of b/w instead of between shows an informal style. The instructor's reply is detailed and comprehensive.
Production & Reception Processes	The student produces question based on cognitive difficulty in understanding difference in certain concepts. The reception at the end of the Instructor is positive and results in the production of a comprehensive reply. The reply is received positively by the student as no further question is asked.
Ideational Processes	The student uses her name/signature at the end of the question so she is conscious about her identity. Her use of 'AOA' also shows her religious identity along with an informal chat style. The instructor's reply is direct and does not formulate any other identity except that of an academic representative.

Semiotic Analysis	The use of space shows student's organized and confident stance. The instructor's reply is very long. If she had used any nonverbal supports the reply might have appeared beautiful and appealed to the visual senses of the student which could help better retention.
Socio-Cognitive Analysis & Power Relations Between Student/Instructor/ University	The question asked by the student is academic and the instructor remains the powerful source of information. The student does not reply back which shows her satisfaction with the answer.

Discussion

Classroom pedagogic discourse includes the norms and processes by which authority is established, exercised and maintained either in the name of discipline or better learning outcomes via media and many other means (Lankshear & Mclaren, 1993). A general notion is that teacher is more powerful and student is not because of the hierarchies of the designated roles. Therefore CDA is important to empower students in educational setups.

The analysis of MDB discourse reveals that any questions posted by students are answered right away and if the student is not satisfied, s/he has the opportunity to ask again and again. Students are more daring to ask questions from their instructors in comparison to face to face educational mode. It is obvious that the MDB discourse is not intimidating or biased for students. Rather, it is friendly. The conversations become successful communicative events which ensure student centricity making MDB a democratic forum. However, the instructor remains the powerful source of information.

Language has the potential to stereotype genders by using marked expressions like 'mankind', thus determining the superiority of one gender over another, as in the above example that of men over women. This sort of language that discriminates any gender is called sexist language. Pakistan is a male-dominated society where women are discriminated as an inferior gender. This discrimination enters into colloquial use of language too. However, a very careful analysis of MDB discourse manifests the absence of the use of sexist language. Rather equality and respect for both genders is obvious, for example, in MDB 2 the male instructor uses both pronouns his/her to address the student. 'His' as a marked pronoun has not been generalized for both genders.

In general, females in Pakistani society hide their identities on social media and emails etc due to many underlying fears. However, in MDB 5 the female student Madiha confidently uses her signature without any fear. Her use of her name like her male class fellows shows that she is confident of her identity as a female as well as considers herself an individual because the MDB discourse is not intimidating for women. Both male and female students get same sort of replies unlike the face to face universities where women may be treated differently from men either in terms of harassment or more favours. MDB discourse manifests gender equality. It is clear that the discourse does not reproduce socially dominant gender relations either in the use of language or in attitudes.

With reference to implicit or explicit ideologies, religious ideology is explicit as it is obvious through the use of 'slam', the Islamic expression for salutations. This ideology, however, is dominant amongst students and the instructors do not display it in their language.

MDB 3 is an interesting example of the presence of implicit ideologies in the discourse. The student being weak in English listening skills requests for a bilingual mode of teaching and the instructor transmits an ideology that English language cannot be taught in Urdu. The ideology can be based on practical teaching experience, but it alludes to linguistic imperialism. The instructor may have inherited this ideology from his English teachers. Linguistic imperialism refers to the

transfer of dominant language either through colonialism or cultural or economic hegemony. English is a mark of superiority in Pakistan. The colonial legacy of the superiority of English language continues even in a postcolonial era. If one's English is good, one is more successful in society either in terms of social prestige or for job purposes etc. However, here teaching methodology is in question. The instructor suffers from monolingual fallacy i.e., English language can be best taught in English language or subtractive fallacy that if other languages are used in an ELT class the standard of English teaching and learning would drop (Phillipson, 1992). One implicit ideology based on cultural and linguistic imperialism can be traced in the discourse. The student may carry it forward and transmit to others unconsciously as the instructor does. However, the next MDB allays the impression of dominance of English language as the student writes his question in Urdu language and the instructor does not discourage him. Native language is not discouraged by the same instructor who expressed the need to teach English in English language. May be teaching English in English is the University policy following suit of most of ELT practices internationally.

The social context is not explicit on MDB as the demographical details are missing from the interface of MDB. The geographical and age details are also missing. The interface by default does not show student name, thus ensuring neutrality, however, the students have the independence to write their names so gender details as per students preferences are revealed. No gender bias is apparent both on students and instructors end. The technology use makes the receptive end neutral and equitable. The instructors cannot be biased based on cultures or class distinctions as these identities of the students are not revealed by the system. This remains an edge to the students in comparison to face-to face mode as no favoritism based on region, cast and creed takes place. The 'education for all' motto removes all biases and creates a unified Pakistani educational community whether local or overseas. The instructors are not biased even about the religious identity of their students and follow a neutral policy. Some students, however, seem ruled by the religious identity in their discourse on MDB. They are neither discouraged nor encouraged, which again shows the absence of any kind of reinforcement of students' ideologies which may be the shared by the instructor.

VUP is a public sector University; therefore, the MDB does not reflect any economic or political benefits to be enjoyed in the process of production. Rather students are facilitated to the maximum with a neutral attitude from the instructors. The MDB as a "model" (van Dijk, 1995a) does not control students' thinking or ways of behaving. Their personal and social cognition is not wrapped in any consciously developed hegemonic ideology. However, technology remains the most powerful entity as its influence can be seen in the chat language that the students frequently use. The students seem less colonized by the colonizers' language and more colonized by the chat language—the neo-colonization of technological determinism. This definitely raises the question: is the spread of technology intimidating in some way? However, it remains emancipatory as the historical, social or political background of the students is simply nonexistent in MDB discourse. Unlike face-to-face classroom interaction, neither a student of influence is facilitated more, nor a student from a backward area or poor background is looked down upon. MDB online learning environment is a great equalizer.

However, there should be more freedom of expression in terms of any oppression the students feel. The moderation of abusive messages should definitely be there, but the ideas to improve the system should be invited rather encouraged from the students end on this very public forum.

Moreover, to develop the critical thinking skills of the students, more disagreement should be encouraged so that the MDB even between instructors and students remain threaded. Contrary to face-to-face discussions, online discussion boards involving disagreements to earlier messages can improve criticality (Chen & Chiu, 2008) in thinking, reading and writing. One of the reasons for the concern of the student in MDB4 that the MDB is not graded, is the availability of a Graded Discussion

Board (GDB) where the students discuss a given topic and are graded on that. The non-graded aspect gives an edge to the student as far as power relationship of the triad student-instructor-university is concerned. The student is independent to ask or not to ask, hence not intimidated by the assessment aspect.

In the selected posts on MDB, intertextuality is also lacking. Intertextuality is the reference to other texts (Fairclough, 1992). In case of MDB, it can mean either a reference to another MDB question or to another relevant text. Although in the overall CDA of MDB the instructors do refer to some replies made earlier which may answer the question of the student; data mining, i.e., to reveal the previous data of MDB to the students is not generally used by the instructors. However, the instructors have the facility to access previous data. More frequent cross-referencing to students' questions can develop an air of intimacy, and valid references to other texts can bring authenticity.

As far as the semiotics of MDB discourse is concerned, the interface has a decent visual impact with its blue color. The interface is balanced which is symbolic of the balanced power relations between students, instructors and the University. However, MDB interface does not show any multimedia files uploading facility. The use of multimedia can make the MDB more vibrant. The use of visuals would also eradicate boredom. Moreover, the use of emoticons can result in a more friendly discourse and decrease the formal air which creates the impact of authoritative discourse. Overall, the VU MDB discourse seems to maintain a balance of power between students and Instructors.

Conclusion/Implications

As it is an advantage with online learning environments in comparison to face to face learning, Virtual University of Pakistan empowers her students by providing a non-intimidating and unbiased atmosphere for posing questions. The instructor, in spite of being the powerful source of information, plays the role of a moderator and facilitator and the overall correspondence remains friendly. The student has the power to ask which balances teacher-student power relations.

Implicit or explicit ideologies can easily pave their way into any discourse in general and academic discourse in particular as the teacher is a source of inspiration and rhetoric can work wonderfully with ethos. Although it is very difficult to find an ideology-free discourse, measures can be taken to minimize it. VUP MDB seems to have take care of this aspect. This is why the explicit ideologies are not promoted and implicit ideologies seem to be a result of lack of critical thinking on part of instructor as an individual in some rare instances. The openness of discourse can be one intimidating factor for instructors to hinder themselves from inculcating their ideologies in students. Overall University policy seems to keep quite a check on this sort of discourse development from either student or instructor's end.

One remarkable achievement of VU MDB discourse is not to reproduce socio-political hierarchies. There is no gender bias or discrimination based on ethnicity or class differences from either end i.e., instructor or the institutional policy. The MDB discourse does not show any explicit ideological propaganda at all from the University or instructor's end. It is a purely neutral forum for educational purposes. Even the social, political or economic backgrounds of the students are not revealed by their questions and the forum does not reproduce the socio-economic and cultural stratification remaining an upholder of equality and democracy. Education for all irrespective of their backgrounds or affiliations is practically demonstrated.

If we pose a question whether MDB is a democratic forum where everyone has a free and loud voice (Williams & Goldberg, 2005) or not, the answer will be reasonably in affirmative. MDB is a democratic forum where students have the opportunity of a free voice. However, the voice does not

sound loud. This is because in the randomly selected postings, there is no cross-questioning. Either the student is too satisfied by the replies or lacks confidence and knowledge to cross-question. Lack of command on English can be a major reason of not cross questioning apart from a clear cut lack of critical thinking. Providing a democratic voice is good enough but an academic discussion board should work towards developing critical thinking by answers that trigger cross-questioning. This will result in student empowerment. Empowerment does not mean only to help students about their problems, it means to enable them courageous enough to challenge an answer they are not satisfied with (of course with all civility and politeness) which eventually may help them to change the social order (Mclaren, 2003). The MDB discourse seems dialectic, ending in a consensus. Efforts should be done by the University and instructors to make the discourse dialogic by making even two disagreeing voices getting along with each other on the forum.

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