The purpose of this paper is to address why understanding the nature of classroom discourse is important as well as explore how the classroom discourse affects student learning and participation. A body of related literature was reviewed to answer the following four queries: (a) what communicative competence in classrooms means, (b) what classroom discourse means and how various interpretations have been made on the concept of classroom discourse, (c) what roles participation structure plays in the classroom discourse, and (d) why the approach of ethnography of communication can be beneficial in the study of classroom discourse. The article ends by drawing some research suggestions and pedagogical implications. It has significance in that it may invoke practitioners and researchers to acknowledge the importance of classroom discourse and ongoing research in relation to classroom discourse.

I. Introduction

Schools are the first large official institution in which students encounter people (i.e.,
teachers and students) of different backgrounds as well as public, social, and cultural interaction during the course of learning. Learning and teaching, which are the basic purpose of schools, are achieved through communication between teacher and students and among students so that the classroom discourse exerts significant influence on learning and teaching. As Cazden (1988) stated, it is critical to “consider how the words spoken in classrooms affect the outcomes of education: how observable classroom discourse affects the unobservable thought processes [italics added] of each of the participants, and thereby, the nature of what all students learn” (p. 99).

A classroom usually embraces diverse linguistic, social, and cultural backgrounds of teacher and students. Many aspects of differences generated from these various backgrounds can be one of the critical factors that trigger serious problems in classroom communication, effective teaching and learning, and fair evaluation. So it is inevitable to investigate the role of these factors that played in the classroom discourse in a holistic or integrated manner. To do so, the ethnography of communication could be one of the effective approaches. The study of classroom discourse, in this sense, is in conjunction with the study of situated language meanings, its use and functions within the holistic context of culture embedded in a speech community of classrooms (Cazden, 2001).

Understanding the nature of classroom discourse is important for the aforementioned reasons. It is critical for teachers and researchers to acknowledge the significance of classroom communication and put special emphasis on the study of classroom discourse. The purpose of the article is aimed to explore how the classroom discourse affects student learning and participation. To answer this question, a body of literature was reviewed in order to (a) examine what the communicative competence in classrooms means, (b) explore how the classroom discourse affects student learning and participation, especially with the focus on the role of participation structure in the classroom discourse, (c) address why the approach of ethnography of communication can be beneficial in the study of classroom discourse, and (d) suggest research and educational implications.