

(En)gendering the TESOL classroom¹

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[Gender] is not socialised into us during childhood and left at that, nor is it upheld by a constant reign of terror. It is socially reproduced (and subverted) in concrete practices and activities which go on all the time. (Cameron 1992: 24)

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the notion that the TESOL classroom, no less than other social contexts, is an important site for the production and regulation of gender. Previous theoretical and empirical accounts of the relationship between language and gender in applied linguistics have suggested that gender precedes and gives rise to language use. However, post-structuralism radically reframes this relationship by suggesting that our social identities (including gender) are constructed *through* language use. The notion of *performativity* (Butler 1990, 1991) is an important dimension of this new perspective. The implications of this view for TESOL are discussed in relation to both classroom practice and research.

Introduction

This paper focuses on gender² in the TESOL classroom. To date, there has been a considerable amount of research on how gender shapes or determines the success of second language learning. However, I would like to explore the alternative proposition, based on more recent post-structuralist thinking, that language learning shapes or produces gender. I will begin by tracing the history of the relationship between language and gender in applied linguistics before exploring the implications of the most recent work in this area for the TESOL classroom.

Perspective I: Gender shapes language use

Until very recently, the term 'gender' was widely represented in applied linguistics as an unproblematic binary variable aligned with 'sex'. Thus, women were 'feminine' and men were 'masculine'. It was assumed that the effect of gender on language use could be investigated in a relatively straightforward fashion. The two main models adopted by researchers to investigate the effect of gender on language have been the *dominance* model and *difference* model.

THE DOMINANCE MODEL

The dominance model is exemplified by Robin Lakoff's (1975) landmark book

Language and Women's Place, in which women were portrayed as disadvantaged speakers because of their early sex role socialisation. Lakoff (1975) characterised women's talk largely in negative terms and that of men largely in positive terms: women were seen as powerless members of American society who were forced through the pressures of a patriarchal society to speak an ineffectual and insecure form of the language. Lakoff's ideas about women's language use can be divided into three categories: first, it lacks the resources that would enable women to express themselves strongly; second, it encourages women to talk about trivial subjects and third, it requires women to speak tentatively. Particular linguistic features of women's speech included:

- men use stronger expletives than women;
- women's speech is more polite than men's;
- trivial or unimportant topics of conversation are women's domain;
- women use 'empty' adjectives such as *adorable*, *charming* and *nice*;
- women use more tag questions than men;
- women use a rising intonation to express uncertainty;
- women use more intensifiers ('I feel *so* happy') and more hedges ('It's *sort of* pretty') than men;
- women are also said to use hyper-correct grammar and not to tell jokes!

Other writers focusing on male dominance in interaction, such as Zimmerman and West (1975), added to this list by suggesting that men used interruptions to silence women whereas the reverse situation was extremely rare.

Lakoff (1975) postulated a direct relationship between gender and the use of linguistic forms. In other words, certain forms were seen as exclusively marking female identity. Although subsequent empirical research has failed to confirm most of the hypotheses formulated by Lakoff, the stereotypes of women's and men's language she created appear to have had a powerful and lasting influence on the field of language and gender. It is important to note that, while Lakoff and her followers clearly saw women's language as socially conditioned, they made no clear distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' – a confusion that until very recently tended to suggest that there was a simple one-to-one correspondence between the two entities.

In general, Lakoff (1975) portrayed women as victims of a patriarchy that forces them to act in weak, passive and ineffective ways or else evaluates their actions as weak, passive and ineffective. Furthermore, her work had the explicit political goal of raising women's awareness of masculine dominance in order that it might be contested.

THE DIFFERENCE MODEL

The early 1980s saw the emergence of another perspective from which to examine gendered language use – the ‘difference approach’. Borrowing from work being done in cross-cultural communication (for example, Gumperz 1982a, 1982b) as well as from the ethnography of communication (for example, Hymes 1974), anthropologists and linguists began to analyse female and male speech from the perspective of difference rather than dominance. While the dominance model was oriented towards a negative evaluation of women’s speech, the difference model interpreted women’s communication in a much more positive light. The difference approach suggested that girls and boys grow up in relatively segregated, same-sex, peer groups in which they learn different ways of relating to one another, and as a consequence, acquire different communicative styles. In other words, men and women are seen as belonging to different cultures. Thus, conversations between men and women break down not so much because men are more powerful than women but because of cross-cultural misunderstanding. A relevant example here, taken from Maltz and Borker (1982), concerns the use of minimal responses. They suggest that responses such as *umhm* and *yes* have different meanings for men and women. For men, such reactive tokens mean ‘I agree with you’, while for women they mean ‘I’m listening to you – please continue’. Thus, when a woman supplies a string of these responses to a man in conversation, he may mistakenly interpret her contributions as agreement. Conversely, if a woman is speaking and her male interlocutor produces very few minimal responses she may believe he is not listening to her.

The work of Deborah Tannen has probably been the most influential of researchers adopting the difference approach. Using the difference model, Tannen (1990) examined a wide range of speech acts including advice-giving, storytelling, reactions to another’s account of problems, asking for and giving information, compliments and gossip. Her claim is that different ways of understanding the social world can be seen in these acts and that men and women have, in effect, their own ‘genderlects’.

In general then, the difference approach, unlike the dominance model, highlights and celebrates the strengths of women’s talk. Men’s conversation, on the other hand, emerges from this analysis as the more deficient communicative style – even though it is normally described by researchers adopting this perspective as being simply different. Women’s talk is characterised as oriented essentially towards collaboration, cooperation, balancing of speaking rights, symmetry and mutual support. In contrast, men’s speech tends to be portrayed as controlling, competitive, asymmetrical and unsupportive. However, male communication from the perspective of the difference approach in cross-sex talk is not seen necessarily as reflecting a desire to dominate women, but rather as mirroring the culture

in which men have been conditioned. In other words, the difference model is presented as a 'no-fault' communicative model whereby neither men nor women are blamed for miscommunication in cross-sex interactions.

Perspective 2: Gender shaped through language use

BEYOND THE DOMINANCE AND DIFFERENCE MODELS

For all their dissimilarities, both the dominance and difference models offer explanations of the relationship between gender and language use which reify and overgeneralise differences in the communicative practices of men and women. Furthermore, in both models, the relationship between sex and gender is seen as unproblematic, that is, socially constructed gender is mapped directly onto biologically determined sex. Accordingly, gender identities and divisions are seen as preceding and giving rise to communicative practice.

In the last few years, however, many of the assumptions underlying research into the relationship between gender and language use have been called into question. Informed by post-modernist and post-structuralist thinking, a number of theorists have begun to grasp the complexity surrounding the concept of gender. First, and perhaps most importantly, the idea of a simple one-to-one relationship between sex and gender has been questioned. In addition, there has been a closer analysis of what it means to suggest that gender is a culturally constructed notion. Writers have begun to grasp the fluidity of gender in the sense that it appears to differ widely from one individual to another, from one context to another, and from one culture to another. At the individual level, the role of agency has been given new prominence. That is, the social construction of gender is no longer seen from a purely deterministic perspective; instead it is interpreted as something which can be resisted or contested. At the situational level it has become increasingly apparent that gender is performed very differently across different speech events. At the broader cultural level, it has become clear that findings generated from studies of middle-class, white, heterosexual men and women cannot automatically be generalised to other cultural contexts. In other words, gender does not exist independently of other social factors such as class, ethnicity and sexual identity, and these elements are constantly in interaction.

In general, the focus of research into the relationship between language and gender has begun to shift away from the analysis of how an individual's supposedly preordained gender determines language use, to an exploration of how gender, as one part of the individual's social identity, is constructed in language use. Following this line of thinking, Ehrlich (1997: 440) stresses that

... individuals construct themselves as 'gendered' by habitually engaging in the social practices of a speech community that are symbolically and practically associated with masculinity or femininity or some mixture thereof. It is not gender

per se, then, that interacts with linguistic practices, but rather the complex set of 'gendered' practices that individuals participate in.

From this perspective, gender may be best understood as a verb rather than a noun, as always in process and never completely achieved.

GENDER AND PERFORMATIVITY

Another extremely important development in theorising the relationship between language and gender lies in the work of the philosopher and queer theorist, Judith Butler (1990, 1991), and, in particular, her notion of *performativity*. For Butler, gender is *performative*. It involves:

... the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a natural sort of being. (Butler 1990: 33)

In the past, many researchers in the social sciences (including sociolinguists) have suggested that how we behave depends on who we already are. Butler turns this notion on its head by suggesting that who we are, and are taken to be, depends on our repeated performance over time of the acts that constitute a particular identity. Thus, being a 'man' or a 'woman' is not something you accomplish once and for all at an early age. Gender must constantly be enacted by repeatedly performing particular acts of both a linguistic and non-linguistic kind in accordance with the prevailing cultural norms which define 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. While Butler insists that gender is policed by tight social norms, she also stresses the role of human agency. People can and do engage in acts of transgression, subversion and resistance. However, it is worth underlining that, in any given culture, this agency is constrained by what is socially constituted as the imaginable domain of gender, and that specific transgressions may have variable consequences for the individual.

The notion of performativity has recently been taken up by Deborah Cameron (1996; 1997) to theorise and investigate the relationship between language and gender. Her work demonstrates the potential of this concept to shift the focus of research in language and gender away from a simple cataloguing of differences between women and men to a subtler and more complex inquiry into how people use their linguistic resources to produce gender differentiation. Moreover, as Cameron (1997) suggests, deconstructing gender into its constitutive acts is not a denial of its existence or social importance. It is precisely *because* gender is so salient that so much work goes into its production and reproduction.

Gender in TESOL

Following the new line of thinking outlined above, I believe that the TESOL classroom, like other social contexts, is an important site for the production and

regulation of gender. It is not simply a situation in which learners' pre-ordained gender dictates their language learning and language use. In arguing from this perspective, I am aware that I may be accused of adopting an 'ideological' position on this issue. However, I believe that all education is ideological; it is simply that some theorists and practitioners recognise this more clearly than others.

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that our learners bring gendered behaviour from the previous cultures in which they have lived. This will include an awareness of the extent to which such norms might be challenged within that culture, and the consequences of going beyond what is acceptable. Second, learners arriving in Australia may find a different set of norms and a different degree of tolerance for subversion of the various norms. For instance, many women are not able to pursue a career outside the home in other countries. However, when they come to Australia, there may be a clash between the values of the old and new cultures in respect to the notion of women having a career. Furthermore, if such women decide to stay at home, they may face direct or indirect censure from other women in either the host or their own ethnic communities who do work outside the home.

Let us turn now to how these kinds of tensions are played out in the TESOL classroom. The ESL teacher is often the students' most significant informant and adviser about living in Australia, especially when they first arrive in the country. Teachers may adopt a descriptive and informed approach to the treatment of gender issues in the classroom. Alternatively, teachers may take on an overly prescriptive approach to these issues. What are taught as 'appropriate' social roles for women and men may be nothing more than traditional Anglo-Australian straitjackets for many of our learners. This kind of teaching may carry with it negative value judgments about the gender behaviour learners have imported with them from their home cultures, and/or the gender roles available to them in their new culture.

The case of men from many Asian countries is an interesting one in my experience. The gender roles these men bring to the TESOL classroom are often very different from those of Anglo-Australian men. At the risk of stereotyping them, their behaviour often (unwittingly perhaps) presents a challenge to the more traditional Anglo-Australian masculinity. It might be anticipated that this challenge would be welcome in the TESOL classroom. However, I have repeatedly witnessed these men being badgered to assimilate into 'Aussie' manhood with such statements as 'You need to drop your voice more, speak more loudly and more forcefully' and 'Have you been to the football yet? Men like football in Australia'. On one occasion I observed a teacher loudly chastising two Asian male students with their arms around each other during the class break, loudly proclaiming that 'Australian men do not put their arms around each other

– people will you think you are homosexual’. Of course, it could be argued that this teacher was attempting to protect these students from potential homophobic aggression outside the classroom. And yet, from the students’ point of view, it would have been easy to conclude that not only is it taboo for a man to put his arm around another man in Australian society, but also that being gay is a terrible thing, neither of which are true.

I would agree that the male learners in question should have been advised about the *possible* interpretation and consequences of their actions in public places. However, the remarks of the teacher in this example about what is or is not ‘appropriate’ gender behaviour smack of being unnecessarily alarmist and overly categorical. Furthermore, I would argue that the different models of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ students bring to Australia should be respected, and should also be allowed to inform and change the dominant Anglo-Australian gender culture over time. The danger for us as teachers is that an over-concern with assisting immigrants and international students to adjust to living in Australian society may sometimes lead to a pedagogy promoting nothing more than assimilation and conformity.

Another problem highlighted by the above example (where the teacher and I clearly had different perspectives) is that there may not be consensus even within a given culture about what gender roles are desirable. This is certainly true of Australian society. There may also be a very wide-range of views about minority sexualities, an issue closely related to gender. Just how well lesbian, gay and transgendered people, in particular, will be accepted varies considerably across communities and individuals. Some teachers have told me they will not broach the topic of homosexuality in the classroom as they are concerned it will be offensive to learners from some cultural backgrounds. In my experience, students of all nationalities are aware that gay people exist and are interested to learn more about them and how they are positioned in Australian society. This does not mean that they will all necessarily affirm sexual diversity – ultimately they will shape their own views on the subject. However, it seems to me quite paternalistic for teachers to remain silent about controversial topics out of ‘respect’ for learners’ home cultures. Of course, this silence may also betray such teachers’ own discomfort in talking about these kinds of issues more generally.

In my view, it would be much more healthy to see teachers exposing their learners to the range of views which exist in Australian society about possible gender roles for women and men rather than falling back on simplistic statements about what roles are, or are not, appropriate based on a narrow, homogenised and overly prescriptive view of how to live in ‘Australian society’. If learners are provided with a range of perspectives on the different possible gender roles and behaviours available to them, they are then capable of making informed

choices about what is appropriate for their own lives. Not to do so is to fail to recognise that learners have agency and are more than capable of exercising it.

It would also be beneficial for research which focuses on the relationship between gender and TESOL to look more closely at the various ways in which the English language classroom *constructs* gender. Given the inter- and intra-cultural tensions around this issue, as previously suggested, it is important to consider what gendered identities we as teachers are helping to produce in the TESOL classroom. I shall now look briefly at some of the research that has been done on gender in second language learning in recent years.

A number of studies have examined gender bias in ESL/EFL textbooks, mostly in relation to the possible social roles and identities they present to female learners. The results have generally suggested that gender bias is highly prevalent in terms of both the relative visibility and the occupational and personal stereotyping of female characters. However, as suggested in a recent article by Jones, Kitetu and Sunderland (1997), it is very difficult to confidently estimate in advance the effect of gender bias in a textbook for two reasons. First, it is impossible to predict the reader's interpretation of a text: a language learner may unconsciously accommodate gender-stereotypical images, but may alternatively contest the sexism of a text. For example, a female learner may resist any positioning of herself as, say, a contented housewife. Second, what happens to a text in class is unpredictable: the teacher may address a sexist text critically, or alternatively, treat a progressive egalitarian text in a non-progressive way. In other words, gender bias in teaching materials *per se* does not guarantee that gender stereotypes will be reinforced in the classroom itself.

Notwithstanding these arguments, EFL/ESL textbooks remain powerful blueprints of what gender identities are acceptable in English speaking countries. Without critical input from teachers, many learners may simply embrace the straitjacketed images of men and women presented to them, perhaps because of the authoritativeness of the textbook itself.

Stereotypical representation in learning materials is not the only way in which gender might be policed in the TESOL classroom. For instance, Jones et al (1997) examined the relationship between learning or practice opportunities and gender in textbook dialogues using three commonly used EFL course books: *Headway intermediate*, *Hotline intermediate* and *Look ahead 2*. They hypothesise that gender imbalances in dialogue roles favouring male learners may predispose female learners to draw invalid inferences about the gendered nature of verbal behaviour of native speakers of the second or foreign language and then continue to imitate it in and out of class. Jones et al (1997) conducted a quantitative study focusing on the number of males and females who played roles in the dialogues, the number of times females and males initiated dialogues, the number

of turns taken by male and female characters, and the number of words spoken by females and males. The study failed to find significant differences between the discourse roles of men and women in these textbooks, at least in the quantitative terms they had set themselves. Reassured by these results Jones et al (1997: 481) conclude that:

Our findings would seem to reflect the progress made and raised consciousness of publishers and writers in the world of language teaching and perhaps in society in relation to gender representation.

Yet, this study provides very limited insight into the gendered nature of mixed-sex dialogues. Indeed, their results suggest that the gender roles created through these textbook conversations were indistinguishable. As the authors themselves acknowledge, their analyses may have been more revealing if they had compared the language functions used by male and female characters to see how gender differentiation was achieved in the dialogues.

In another study, Poulou (1997) examined mixed-sex dialogues in two textbooks used to teach Greek as a foreign language. Poulou used a similar methodology to that of Jones et al (1997), except that her study also examined the type of language functions used by women and men in the dialogues. Poulou found significant gender differences on all of the measures used to analyse the conversations, namely, the amount of speech, the initiations and completions of dialogues, as well as the language functions used by the textbook characters. In general, the male characters in the two textbooks assumed a much more active conversational role than their female counterparts in terms of the amount of speech, initiations and completions of dialogues and language functions. Poulou (1997: 72) concludes that:

It is surely worth making an attempt to ensure a decent representation of the two sexes and not to allow language learners to be disadvantaged by discrepancies in the verbal behaviour between female and male textbook characters.

In a recent article, Shehadeh (1999) also argues that TESOL professionals need to be able to engineer situations that create and sustain equal opportunities for female and male learners in all aspects of classroom interaction. However, in my view, teachers also need to help students to develop greater critical awareness of the kinds of gender roles which are created in classroom activities, and the extent to which they are representative of the range of roles they might take up in the society in which they are currently living.

In terms of research, perhaps the major challenge facing work in this area of TESOL is that the concept of gender remains very much under-theorised in so far as it is still unquestioningly treated as a polarised, binary category mapped onto sex. As a result, studies on gender (such as those cited above) restrict

themselves to comparing the way men and women are portrayed without also examining the range of behaviours and roles *within* these gender categories represented in classroom materials and activities.

In other words, research on gender in TESOL needs to be much more strongly informed by an awareness of the diversity of gendered roles and identities which exist in contemporary Australian society. The same applies to the work of teachers in the classroom. If this is not allowed to happen, then the TESOL classroom is opening itself to rightful accusations of regulating and policing gender and, by extension, sexuality. In a groundbreaking study of a transgendered ESL learner in Australia, Jewell (1997) illustrates how easily some learners can be alienated by course books and classrooms where gender remains understood as inextricably linked with binary sex. This learner's investment in acquiring English was demonstrably diminished by what she perceived to be a discriminatory and reactionary approach to gender representation in the course she was attending.

It appears, therefore, that the range of gender roles and identities featured in TESOL classrooms requires more careful and sustained scrutiny than has been the case to date. As suggested previously in this article, it could be that the TESOL classroom is especially reluctant to acknowledge and incorporate the complexities of contemporary gendered life because teachers are apprehensive about 'imposing' new gender roles on students who bring previously formed gender identities with them from their home cultures. The end result, however, may be that they leave their students with bland, one-dimensional and impoverished representations of how women and men actually live in contemporary Australian society. Such an approach radically underestimates the capacity of our learners to shape their own social identities in a new culture.

Conclusion

The recent developments in thinking around the relationship between gender and language use described earlier in this paper seem to me extremely timely for the study of gender in TESOL. We need a much better understanding of gender and how the classroom serves as an important site for its production. Furthermore, the recognition of the crucial role that we, as teachers, play in the ongoing construction of our learners' social identities brings with it the responsibility to develop a much more pluralistic approach to gender than has hitherto been the case. This involves our acknowledging and respecting the gender roles which learners bring to the classroom from other cultures, showing awareness of the diversity of roles available in Australian society, and finally, having the capacity to assist learners with the task of finding the gendered spaces which they wish to inhabit in the present.

NOTES

- ¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 32nd annual TESOL convention in Seattle, March 1998 and the AMEP conference, Melbourne, November 2000.
- ² Throughout this paper the term 'gender' will be used to refer to the socially constructed behaviour of women and men. As such, it is distinguished from 'sex' which is a biologically determined category. This distinction has been widely used in contemporary discussions of gender since the 1970s.

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