

Gender Relations in the Classroom

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Abstract

Studies have shown that when a teacher does not allow his/her students to make oral contributions, s/he is also restricting their access to learning. In order to change the traditional view that teachers should do all the talking, educationists have suggested that students should be encouraged to verbalize what they learn.

Recent studies on gender have claimed that not only is talk asymmetrically distributed between teachers and pupils, but between boys and girls as well. If this proves to be right, then there would be in fact three subject positions in the classroom – that of the teacher, that of the male student and that of the female student. The question I pose here is whether teachers somehow favour boys by allowing them more space to talk.

This article was motivated by the readings I have been doing on the issue of gender, and more specifically after I read a text called *Gender Inequalities in Classroom Talk*, on how two British linguists, Joan Swann and David Graddol (1993), carried out a study on gender inequalities in two primary schools in Britain.

In their paper, Swann and Graddol introduce the issue by focusing on the power relations that exist in the classroom, and how teachers may seem to be responsible for almost all the amount of talking. According to them, the talking should be done collaboratively, instead of being asymmetrically done by the authority in charge, that is, the teacher. These unequal power relations are to do with what Norman Fairclough (1989) calls *subject positions*:

(...) the socialization of people involves them coming to be placed in a range of *subject positions*, which they are exposed to partly through learning to operate within various discourse types; (...) each discourse type establishes its particular set of subject positions, which those who operate within it are constrained to occupy. (p. 102)

In classroom interaction there are two subject positions – that of the teacher and that of the student. Traditionally, while the former is expected to do the talking, the latter should remain silent and learn, making

oral contributions now and then, but only when allowed by the teacher. In response to this traditional view, several educationists have suggested that teachers should use strategies which enable their students to talk about what they learn. In doing this, pupils have the opportunity to show that the process of learning is proving to be effective. In other words, when a teacher does not give her/his pupils space to talk, s/he is also restricting their access to learning.

Recent studies have shown that talk is not only unequally distributed between teachers and pupils, but between pupils themselves, more precisely between boys and girls. It has been proved that boys contribute more to classroom talk than girls. Amazingly, further research on gender (Graddol and Swann, 1989; Fairclough, 1992; Graddol *et alii*, 1993; Tannen, 1994; Magalhães, 1995) has demonstrated that similar phenomena occur in adult everyday talk. Several linguists have claimed that the stereotype that women talk too much and often interrupt men is far from reflecting the truth. Actually, statistics have shown that topics introduced by males are more easily accepted than those introduced by females and that women are more often interrupted by men while talking than the other way round (Fishman, 1983, *apud* Fairclough, 1989). My point is this – are these social/cultural inequalities in the adult world a consequence of those years spent at school? As classrooms are obviously not isolated from the outside world, and as language cannot be treated as something standing outside society, the answer is likely to be ‘yes’. If the answer proves to be positive, then this would mean that instead of having two subject positions in the classroom, we would in fact have three – that of the teacher, that of the male student and that of the female student.

In their study, Joan Swann and David Graddol analysed sequences of talk between two female teachers and their groups of primary school children, aged 9-11. In both sequences, students were supposed to describe experiments they had carried out in previous lessons. Regardless of the teacher’s style (relaxed or strict), girls contributed far less than boys. Video cameras were used in Swann and Graddol’s observations, and by analysing the tapes, the two researchers noticed that the teachers gave boys more opportunities to talk by choosing them to answer more complex questions (e.g. Wh- questions), while girls were usually asked rhetorical or yes-no questions. This selection was done either by the teachers’ calling students’ names or simply by their glancing at them. In order to understand the processes involved in social interactions, one should be familiar with a term which was first introduced in the 1970’s and that has been broadly used among discourse analysts – the ‘turn-taking system’, i.e., a set of structures of conversational openings and closings. Swann and Graddol are aware of the fact that “(...) the taking of a turn at speaking requires the collaboration of all parties, for example, the use of nonverbal cues by the person speaking to enable the next person to synchronize his or her entry.” This means that, if boys usually make far more oral contributions than girls, teachers should somehow take the blame.

As an EFL teacher, I started to wonder whether such inequalities were likely to occur in EFL classes, an environment in which girls are generally thought to be more outstanding than boys. Eager to solve this puzzle, I decided to observe some of my colleagues’ classes, and to observe my own classes as well. After

doing several observations, I yet could not notice any signs of the so called 'favouritism for the boys', but I was aware of the fact that there was a difference in the amount of attention given by the teachers. Coincidentally, on the occasion I was carrying out my observations, I attended a seminar in which the lecturer, Diana Hicks, talked about boys' and girls' behaviour in the classroom. She stated that several studies (especially Delamont, 1994) have shown that boys are naturally more active than girls, and therefore have to be monitored more often. They usually love activities such as games and competitions, because they need to be challenged all the time. If challenge is not present, they become frustrated, bored and impatient. Their competitive nature can be easily observed when, after receiving a test, the first thing they will do is compare their marks, rather than take a look at their mistakes, as most girls will do. Figures in these studies show that girls can focus on the same activity for twenty minutes, while boys will lose interest after five minutes.

In the following observations I decided, then, to focus more on discipline problems. Perhaps that would be the answer to my questions. At that time I had been observing a class of children aged 8-9 years old. They usually sat in a semi-circle, and boys and girls never seemed to mix up. Sometimes there was even a couple of empty chairs splitting the group in half. I noticed that the boys used to stand up a lot, either to ask to go to the toilet, ask questions to the teacher, or simply for the sake of showing off. This may sound silly, but since then, during my observations, I started to count how many times those children (boys and girls) used to stand up. Astonishingly, on one of the occasions, the boys left their places 44 times, against the girls' 19 times. With figures like that, isn't it obvious that the teacher should spend most of her time addressing to boys (i.e. monitoring them) than to girls? She often asked the boys questions in order to punish them for their bad behaviour, and by noticing that, I realized that I myself had been doing that in my own classes. Most teachers do it – uncounsciously, though. When a teacher asks an open question and immediately looks at a disruptive student, this student may take this as "*Hey, you, answer the question!*" . This kind of thing is very frequent during reading activities, as well. Reading aloud in class should be regarded as a pleasant activity, but I have noticed that some teachers tend to pick up disruptive students to read in order to punish them. Eventually, bad *and* good students will be convinced that reading is a dull activity, and they will start to view it as a tool the teacher uses to keep them under control. More experienced teachers (and I have learnt this tip from them) would simply walk towards the chatterbox, stand next to him/her and call another student to read.

Unconsciously or not, we cannot deny the fact that teachers usually tend to give special attention to boys. What is worse, boys somehow seem to notice that and start to assume a controlling attitude, interrupting girls and demanding more from teachers. Boys demand more from teachers because they are naturally more active and assertive, and therefore less shy than girls. When in doubt about the meaning of a word, for example, boys will not hesitate about immediately asking the teacher. Girls, on the other hand, will preferably ask the person next to them or even look the word up in a dictionary. A teacher should be aware

of these differences and try to find a way to minimize them as much as possible. S/he might achieve this balance by encouraging girls to contribute to classroom talk and thus have them benefit from the education they are receiving.

As a conclusion, what I can say is that having started to reflect on the issue of gender inequalities has certainly made me change. I do not think we, teachers, should be the ones to contribute to the perpetuation of what society expects male and female subject positions to be.

References

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