Some Critical Reflections on Gender in the Classroom

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Abstract

This article attempts to understand how gender functions in classroom interaction by theoretically mapping select studies in the area and presenting the findings of a preliminary study that explores student perceptions regarding gender and power in the classroom. Results show that classrooms are sites of gendered talk, perpetuating stereotypes by learners and teachers while blurring boundaries regarding when a particular behaviour/speech becomes an act of power or remains a gender difference.

Keywords: Gender, power, classroom interaction, gender stereotypes

Introduction

Gender pervades education spaces through numbers and textbook representations, teacher-pupil interaction, and students' behaviour. Gender representation (or misrepresentation) in textbooks through stereotypical tropes reinforce, support or challenge the social arrangements in society (Mills & Abolaji, 2015), and much scholarship exists on gender representation in textbooks (Sunderland, 1992). Classroom interaction of learners serves to highlight the differences in men and women's speech (Tannen, 1990) and gender performance (Butler, 1990). This study contributes to gender and learning by focusing on gender in classroom interaction, theoretically mapping select studies in the area and presenting the findings of a preliminary inquiry through a small sample of learners.

The way gender unfolds in classrooms can be understood by examining

three theoretical positions on conceptions of gender through language: language privileges gender, gender as a construct through socialization, and gender as performance. Lakoff (1973,1975) argues that language privileges the male gender, associating powerlessness to women's talk and how language treats them. Women's language is marked by heavy use of adjectives and intensifiers (cute, lovely, sweet), politeness in tone, more use of suggestions and question tags than directives, all of which seem to portray them as less assertive and more submissive. Furthermore, the English language is sexist, demeaning women by focussing on their marital/relationship status, associating them with the attributes of smallness, fragility and marking the male gender as a norm. Some examples that support this are titles such as Mr/Mrs/Ms and pairs of words like master/mistress and doctor-lady doctor. Lakoff's formulations highlight the intricate ways in which language, gender and power are related, leading to subsequent studies on how this happens (Hall & Bucholtz, 1995; Lazar, 2005).

In contrast to Lakoff, Tannen (1990) claims that the differences in men and women's talk were due to socialization and gendering patterns, causing them to think, speak, behave and write differently. Boys and girls learnt (consciously and unconsciously) how to behave acceptably from their social environments such as home, classroom, eateries, cinema, etc. Women, in conversations, were more oriented towards collaborative talk, sympathy and support, while men were inclined towards problem-solving, rational arguments and independence. This view is also reflected in the works of Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) and Danby (2002).

Butler's work on performativity (1990) contributed to seeing gender as an act in which individuals constantly performed their gender in their speech, dress, and behaviour. This view brought about a paradigm shift, highlighting the relation between gender and power.

Select Studies on Gender and Classroom

One of the fundamental issues in studying gender is representation and numbers. According to Marshall and Reinhartz (1997), the representation of women in science and mathematics is less, and gender differences exist in the way men and women discuss academic achievements. While men attribute it to hard work, skill-set and effort, women downplay

it to sheer luck, often undermining their role in learning. A related area is the classroom interaction of men and women made visible by Boutemedjet's study (2019) where multiple discourses and images were constructed of women as 'good students' and back-benchers, illustrating how classrooms were sites for gendering and ideological construction.

Bergvall and Remlinger (1996) studying interactional strategies employed by learners, find that men and women engage in class talk to grab the floor. However, women engage more in task-continuative behaviours such as giving feedback, backchannel support, validation and repetition of what others say, supportive laughter and constructive extension of academic topics. In contrast, men engage more in disruptive task behaviour such as derisive comments, mocking humour, and asides, especially for their female colleagues. Their research goes against the traditional notion of women being silent, passive contributors in the classroom. This study also shows the subtle ways in which dominance works with gender. Davies (2003) found that adolescent women students engaged in collaborative, supportive talk emphasizing loyalty to each other while the boys engaged in stereotypical macho talk, using sexist language against the girls. Hence she argues that gender equality has to be achieved through classroom discourses and practices both by the students and teachers. Similar findings are reported in other studies (Duran, 2006; Sadeghi et al., 2012). Therefore, an analysis of language and gender will aid in uncovering how power operates when students speak or choose to remain silent.

Another aspect of gender is the way it is performed in classrooms. Santoro & Major (2010) explore the 'good student' discourse in primary classes to show how girls are more associated with discourses of being diligent, conscientious, polite, and well-mannered. These discourses are perpetuated by both the learner and the teachers, enabling and restricting the growth of women students, shaping how they interact in the class, work for grades and perform their feminine gender roles in conformity with the socio-cultural beliefs. Research from India also highlights this. Bhattacharjee (1999), in her study of primary children from the rural working-class, found that gender was inscribed in everyday practices and contexts. There were demarcated gendered spaces for learning and recreation. Courtesy, docility, good behaviour were expected from girls and boisterousness/aggression were encouraged in boys. In another study, Rayaprol (2011) contends that teaching gender is a sensitive issue

in the Indian context; also, there is less female representation in science and sport; women tend to adopt masculinized identities to be taken seriously by their male colleagues, underscoring the deeply entrenched gender roles and gendered education in our society.

However, gender is not static but changes with context. Baxter (2003), in her pioneering work, examined the speaking and listening proficiency levels of middle school students. The crux of her research was the shifting gender identities of the pupils and how one is always doing one's gender (be it a girl, boy or any other gender). Secondly, gender performance is a power struggle. At one moment, a person can be powerful but powerless the next, hinting at identities in flux. Similarly, Peace's (2003) investigation of undergraduate psychology students demonstrated two crucial aspects: that men were not always the oppressors and women consciously performed their gender depending on the context. Peace found that women could switch between playing the roles of victim or manipulators, asserting their power when necessary to balance the asymmetries of power and gender in society. Moreover, they seemed grateful for all the power they possessed and exerted despite gender inequalities! Most of these studies highlight that the complex interactions of gender with power and other socio-cultural indices give rise to layered, multi-dimensional analyses where what one says and does is as important as what is not said and done. Thus, it is vital to study interactional strategies and discourses of different genders in the classroom and perceptions about it. Discussed below are findings from an exploratory study that I had conducted with my students. Such studies are a relevant step in understanding how students assess themselves and the people around them, their social realities and gender identities (Crombie et al., 2003).

Findings of a Preliminary Study

Fourteen scholars enrolled in the Language and Gender course while pursuing their master's degree participated in the study. They had to email their views on how men and women students interact in the classroom and how gender and power are related in classroom interaction. The aim was to gauge their comprehension of gender roles and their embeddedness in teaching/learning contexts. Students' responses, with their identities masked, are discussed below.

In answer to the first question, most reported that women students participated actively in classrooms, eagerly answering questions compared to men who were more aloof and spoke when addressed directly. F shared that most "*girls feel the eagerness or say pressure to answer any question*" while K attributed the loquacity of women to social expectations because they have "*to constantly prove that they're just as good if not better than their male counterparts*" signalling their knowledge of deep-seated gender disparities. N stated that men "*participate only when they are called out or pressurized*" which was corroborated by G, condoning their reluctance to speak. However, it is interesting to note that N attributes the disinclination of men to talk to their power and ego—"*they need to be invited for their participation which somewhat shows they don't belong.*" In opposition to this, D asserts that normally men don't answer in class but if they do "*they want everyone to pay attention*" signalling their need for attention and control. D adds that some men might even "*challenge the authority of the female teacher*" in class, hinting that power dynamics intersect with many identities, that of peers and those traditionally invested with authority, such as teachers.

A related issue was the difference in tone and the use of longer sentences emphasized by student I—"*a heavy and commanding tone is seen in men's voice, whereas women's tone is soft*". Women's use of longer sentences is not just a point of gender difference but also shows powerlessness, as M indicates that they might be "*fearful of judgment*" or "*miscommunication*". Thus, it becomes clear that gender differences in classroom interaction display power and represent one's identity. That gender is a part of all phases of education can be seen in the response of C, who cited their own school experiences of how boys and girls behaved. Boys used "*physical gestures like hitting each other on the head*", use of slang and abuses, but the girls were more soft-spoken, polite and talked in a lower pitch endorsing stereotypical associations of aggression with boys and courtesy with girls. On gender differences to academic learning, H says, girls learn through "*sharing their collective understanding*" while boys understand things "*by working it out alone, after class*", which is the reason for their non-responsiveness but attentiveness in class.

Responses to the second question on how gender and power are related also offer insights about teaching/learning environments. A's opinion hits at unequal gendering patterns due to which women are expected to be soft-spoken and polite, yet "*such gendered attributes are not ascribed*

to men." F extends such gendered behaviour to include women teachers who accept "*contradictory views and opinions*" and treat male counterparts as being firm and authoritative while providing information. Student L too endorses this by stating that women are more "*tolerant of the changes*" in their answers while men "*tend to stick to their answers*", making the other person understand, showing their assertiveness and dominance. While both J and C agree that either gender can be dominant in the class, J ascribes it to upbringing since "*values imbibed from home certainly reflects*" how topics are discussed in class. J also states that "*embarrassment and humiliation*" from the opposite sex is a factor, especially for women, as men can mock them by showing their dominance. Participant B extends this argument to include the behaviour of teachers. Some might comment on the appearance and clothes of women students like "*Ladko ko dikhane aai ho?*" (*Come to impress the boys?*), while others give preference to boys in subjects like mathematics and physics to women in home science and humanities, all of which betrays a patriarchal mindset, conformity to traditional gender roles and raise questions on the intelligence of boys versus girls, giving power to the former. Thus, how students interact in class among themselves and with teachers and the behaviours they imbibe and perform all indicate that gender is a way of doing power.

Conclusion

Classroom and educational spaces are powerful sites for demonstrating gender differences in women and men's speech, behaviour, writing, and exerting control in direct-indirect ways, as reinforced by scholarship in that area. Moreover, student responses highlight the typical biases and stereotypes prevalent in the Indian context vis-à-vis gender differences. The findings are similar to the research done abroad but extend it by blurring boundaries between when a particular behaviour/ speech becomes an act of power or remains just a gender difference. Furthermore, the responses display that like student, teachers too can behave in gendered ways and perpetuate inequalities.

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