

Gendered Language in the Classroom

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This paper discusses some important issues concerning discourse and gendered language in educational settings. Initially, two key concepts are dealt with: *discourse* and *gender*. Subsequently, the concept of gendered discourse and its adverse effect on students in educational settings will be highlighted. Meanwhile, sexist language as the prevailing manifestation of gendered discourses in the classroom is taken into account. Due to the importance of second and third feminist waves in the discussion of gendered language, we will focus on these two waves with greater depth in this article.

Having identified gender biases in educational settings, the author analyzes the existence of such a trend in three possible areas of “teacher-talk to students”, “student to student talk” and textbooks. The paper ends by offering suggestions as to possible ways to lessen the effect of gendered discourses in classroom settings. After all, critically scrutinizing the three areas of concentration concerning gender-biased issues in educational setting accompanied by going beyond mainstream, conscious raising through intervention can yield a better outcome to the benefit of all young girls and boys whom we consider as the future women and men in the wider society.

Key words: gendered language, gendered discourse, gender biases sexist language

INTRODUCTION

Oftentimes we are oblivious to the fact that the chunks of words one produces can exercise a powerful effect on the audience. One of the many concerns of linguistic studies is to go beyond the surface level of speech and focus on its significant effect in different settings. Once this effect happens to be destructive, it is labeled as “damaging discourse” (Sunderland, 2004, p. 191). The scope of this type of discourse is important as not many people are aware of the negative effect of some underlying concepts conveyed through a discourse. For instance, the sentence “no money, no honey” in the context of a bar. This simple sentence converses with the audience in a dozens of ways depending on different interpretations. First, this sentence conjures an unfair/insulting picture of the women. Second, it suggests the idea that only rich people can socialize with women which is another insulting picture of women. Third, it gives the indication that women are absolutely money-oriented. Although the list can be limitless, it suffices to say that this simple sentence which is part of a larger discourse can convey many negative and damaging ideas demeaning to women.

Another example can further clarify the point made in the preceding paragraph. In the phrase ‘So have you, women, finished gossiping?’ there are a number of false perceptions concerning women which need to be unpacked. The phrase, as Mills (2004) holds, could unfairly suggest that women’s talk could be trivial and not of great importance, that women gossip more than men, that two women talking together can be assumed to be engaging in gossip, and so on. By considering every sentence extracted from a piece of discourse, we can acknowledge the fact that many sexist, biased and racial concepts are conveyed through daily communication; thus it is essential to take this phenomenon into consideration with utmost care.

The main purpose of this article is to highlight the importance of identifying gendered discourses and how crucial they might be to students as female/male members of society. This appears to be more crucial, given the fact that the kind of discourses produced in the classroom can have profound

effect on the mentality of each and every student in school where most of them experience formal discourses for the first time. Thus, teachers ought to take care of how they talk to male and female students. Meanwhile, focusing on the nature of language used in the classroom and instructional materials by the teachers and textbook writers, respectively, and refining the discourses produced in classroom can be helpful to educate our learners in a less gender-biased environment. A large number of gender studies are primarily concerned with highlighting these gendered discourses and halting the trend.

FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS IN DISCOURSE AND GENDER

Due to the importance of discourse and gender, these two key concepts will be thoroughly discussed in this section. Nonetheless, this is not an easy task, partly because different approaches theorize about concepts and the relationship between them, differently; partly because of the rapid development in and increasing sophistication of these fields (Sunderland, 2004). At all events it is aimed in this section to give a clear picture of discourse, gender, and then look at gendered discourse.

Discourse Analysis and Discourse

A discourse is an instance of language use in a specific context and according to Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, this term stems from the Latin, *discursus*, that is running to and from (Discourse, 2009). Discourses are linguistic units composed of several utterances in conversation, arguments or speeches (Howarth, 2000). Discourse has a variety of meanings; linguistic meanings include first, the broad stretch of written or spoken language and second, the more specific 'linguistic and paralinguistic interaction between people in a specific context' (Talbot, 1995, p. 50). The third meaning of discourse from a linguistic point of view as Mills (1997, p. 33) holds can be regarded as a vehicle to convey ideology in a covert manner. The meaning of

discourse as used in this article is as stated in the third sense; in other words, the author adheres to that sense of discourse in which every stretch of discourse embodies a great amount of information concerning the ideology of those involved therein. Considering this view of discourse we can conclude that a useful way in the study of discourse is to see discourses as ways of seeing the world, often with the reference of power and domination (Fairclough, 2003).

Studies of discourse derive from several theoretical traditions, such as modernism, structuralism and feminism, that examine the relations between language and context (Strega, 2005). Discourse is enduringly fluid and there is no shortage of discourse to analyze. This is especially true as modes of communications expand, exponentially more texts are published year on year and information of different sorts becomes available. This leads to the fact that discourse analysis encompasses huge areas to investigate. Even though this paper focuses, *inter alia*, on the discourses produced in the classroom.

There are various approaches concerning discourse analysis. We can divide the approaches to discourse analysis in two clusters: Post-structuralist approaches and critical approaches to discourse analysis. The former as Baxter (2003) holds are concerned relatively broadly with linguistic analysis and with the notion of constraining and enabling power. Critical Discourse Analysis, on the other hand, ‘aims to show non-obvious ways in which language is involved in social relations of power and domination’ (Fairclough, 2001, p. 229). There is a three-dimensional method of discourse analysis, where for Fairclough, the method of discourse analysis takes account of “linguistic *description* of the language text, *interpretation* of the relationship between the (productive and interpretative) discursive processes and the text, and “*explanation* of the relationship between the discursive processes and the social processes” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 97).

From another perspective, these two approaches, can be attributed to covert and subtle sexism. In other words, post-structuralist analysis of discourse reveals the idea that gendered discourses exist in our daily communication due to the inequality between women and men which is

ascribed to enabling power and not much can be done to overcome. Even though based on critical discourse analysis, gendered discourse is attributed to the hidden factors involved in producing gendered discourses such as cultural beliefs and false perceptions and these gendered notions conveyed through discourse are not tangible. This is the exact definition of subtle sexism.

Discourse analysis has aroused the interest of many scholars including Wodak (2000, p. 1) who believes that “Discourse and discrimination is a study of how racism, antisemitism and ethnicism are reflected in discourse.” In this paper, the author would like to affix gender issues to the definition of discourse analysis by Wodak; in other words aside from racism antisemitism and ethnicism, we can analyze how gender discrimination can be mirrored in discourse.

Gendered Language

Sex is considered as something biological. *Gender* is what societal conceptions make of that. Not only does Gender concern divergence between women and men, but also similarities as well as differences *within* and across gender (of which there are many). “It is a mistake to see gender as residing solely in embodied individuals. Gender can be seen in *what is said and written about women and men*” (Biglar Beigi, 2008, p. 2).

The ‘perception of gender’ is equivalent in part to the significance ascribed to gender. This refers to how gender is viewed, that is what women, men, boys and girls “*should*” be like including what they are supposed to do and how they should behave and talk.” Very often, sadly, such perceptions are ‘essentialist’, i.e. they assume that women and men just ‘are’ this way and that essentialist views ignore the possibility that gender can be socially constructed throughout a person’s life” (Biglar Beigi, 2008, p. 1) and that a person should not be considered a passive *agency*, and, to an extent, they can decide how to behave or regulate their behavior in a certain situation (including language) in various contexts. Essentialist viewpoint concerning

gender can confine the range of opportunities open to both and is likely to damage gender interactions). As an illustration, both genders can be reprimanded for transgression, if a man performs a gender stereotyped role traditionally thought of as 'feminine, or in case a female converses articulately in a specific mixed-sex context which is conventionally expected to be less talkative (Sunderland, 2004, p. 155).

While one use of gender indicates particular grammatical properties of a language, the use of gender with which we are concerned in linguistic terms is connected with human beings and entails any differences between women and men being socially or culturally learned, mediated or constructed. Gender has many applications for men and women and can place each gender identity at an advantage or disadvantage in connection with a certain context. Women do not have to stay at home, do not have to earn less than men, do not have to wait for men to propose for marriage, etc. In the study of gender the debate of nature against nurture is a crucial issue; while human beings have innate biological differences, the way we nurture an individual's mentality concerning women and men's role serves an important purpose in the concept of gender which is based on the second wave of feminism. However, at a later time, this concept of gender is revisited in the third wave of feminism, where gender is regarded as female/ male tendency and gendered language is ascribed to the hidden influence of enabling powers in the society at large.

The second wave categorizes the resurgence of women's activism beginning in the late 1960s and ending with the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment and the Reagan-Bush era. Third wave feminism claims to encompass the young women born in the 1960s and 70s who feel they should do their best to put themselves apart from older women (Orr, 1997). The main concern of second wavers is to rectify corporate gender discrimination and negative media stereotypes. Therefore, within the realm of linguistics, human rights, United Nations regulations and any other establishment, many job titles not projecting the concept of equality between women and men are criticized.

On the other hand, the third wavers position themselves as critics of second wave feminisms (Heywood & Drake, 1997). Here we are on the verge of recognizing the fact that gender discrimination is projected through hidden influence of media, cultures, enabling powers and any other social and historical factors. Since the emergence of the third wave of feminism, this has come under legitimate criticism and revision. The main problem with the third wave is that they are not rebelling against the reality of feminism and fall into the same pitfalls as the second wave of feminism (Mills, 2004). The reality of feminism is to find ways to eliminate gender-biased concepts and lies in the fact that gender differences are shaped by our experiences rather than our cultures, races and/or any other social matters. (Schriefer, 2002, p. 76). For instance, in some countries women are housebound and not allowed to participate in. In this case, the root cause of this code of conduct based on second and third wavers can be easily attributed to cultural and religious beliefs. If we shift our attention from these dominating factors to the experience shaped by them, the outcome will be more practical. In case of the above example concerning abolishing the women's rights, if the focus of attention changes from the cause of this phenomenon to the effect which it exercises, a greater contribution to eliminate gender discrimination can be made.

The core concept in the new theories in feminism as Schriefer (2002) holds, is focusing on the experience of women and men concerning gender-biased issues. This experience may take place in every setting and through every possible medium and if we focus on every experience shaped by biased cultural and social factors, we can stand against the impact of gender-biased attitudes in a more practical manner. The present article, which focuses on gendered discourses produced in the classroom settings, draws the reader's attention to the gendered language as a gendered experience for students which takes place through instructional materials and class interaction between the teacher and students. By focusing on this gender-biased experience that happens in the classroom, we strive to focus on the cause of this phenomenon and encourage students to challenge this experience.

Initially, it is notable to identify what these discourses are, and they are likely to be different in different cultural contexts and communities of practice. They are also likely to have different values, relative to other discourses. For instance, a discourse of ‘girls as good language learners’ (basically an essentialist discourse) may hold true in some contexts but not others. In those in which it does, it may be a ‘progressive’ discourse if girls are on the whole seen as non-academic and destined for domestic work. Alternatively, it may be a ‘gendered discourse’ if it implies that girls are much less good at other subjects, such as science, which are often associated with more prestigious and lucrative career paths (Biglar Beigi, 2008, p. 2). In the following sections gendered discourse along with possible damaging aftermaths in the classroom will be dealt with in detail.

Gendered Discourses in The Classroom

From the linguistic point of view, discourse can be analyzed through different discourse analysis approaches. Based on a structural discourse analysis, a stretch of discourse can be inspected at sentence level produced regardless of the context and underlying meaning of sentences. This approach to discourse analysis is quite old and inapplicable to our present time due to the fact that there are many sentences in a stretch of discourse based on post-structural and critical discourse analysis which cannot be analyzed in isolation without considering the context. Moreover, in a piece of discourse there are many hidden channels of communication that can be interpreted aside from the more obvious purposes of communication. An example is presented to clarify the concept of critical discourse analysis. Consider the following which is an apartment advertisement posted at the bus stop in Malaysia:

There is a middle room (fully furnished) to rent
- very clean
- great view at high floor
Only female / good-looking /no Moslem/no Indian

The above advertisement contains a great deal of covert and overt discourses. The primary purpose of this piece of discourse is to inform people of a vacant apartment for rent. This is the only discourse you can think of based on the structural discourse analysis. However, based on critical discourse analysis, the following hidden discourses are produced:

1. Gendered discourse: The phrases “only female” and “good-looking” promote implicitly the idea that the owner is looking for a partner rather than a potential tenant.
2. Discriminatory discourse: The phrase ‘No Moslem’ shows religious discrimination and promotes the idea that Moslems may have a style of life that the owner does not like and hence the owner is not interested in having a Moslem tenant.
3. Racist discourse: It is clear from the phrase “no Indian” that the advertisement supports racist attitudes towards a particular community. Although there is a danger of reading too much into a text, it could be deemed that a female would only want a female room mate and likewise be more wary of a different ethnic group. That is why as Jane Sunderland in an interview conducted by Biglar Beigi in 2008 suggests that discourse should be dealt with utmost attention, due to the fact that in one culture or situation, a presumably gendered discourse can have no damaging effect on women and men, girls and boys. Aside from this point, what is apparent from the above example is that a group of phrases in a particular context other than the main purpose of communication between the participants in a piece of discourse, communicate with the interlocutor in a hidden fashion or in an implicit manner which can conduce racism, sexism and discrimination. These hidden ways are called ‘gendered discourses’ (Sunderland, 2004, p. 150) and in this article it is intended to highlight these discourses in classroom settings with a focus on gendered discourses. The author wishes to underline the existence of gendered discourses through dividing them into three major areas of concentration in class; namely,

teacher-talk to students, student to student talk and textbooks.

Even though class talk is very crucial in understanding the deep meaning of many issues proposed in the classroom settings, there are a great deal of gendered biased issues which can be reinforced through teacher/student and student/student talks in the classroom. Sunderland (2004, p. 89) alludes to the fact that teachers normally interact more with male rather than female students in classroom and ask more questions from them and she emphasized the fact that teachers should produce equal opportunity discourse in the classroom where the females and males should be equally given the opportunity to express themselves. From my own personal experience as a university instructor in Iran, my female students are mostly reluctant to embark on a discussion in class. As a teacher with linguistic background, I tried most of the time to grant them equal opportunities to talk. Boys' underachievement at school has become a familiar and international theme in many schools in different parts of the world (Epstein et al., 1998; Francis & Skelton, 2001). We see traces of 'poor boys' discourses, showing teachers' sympathy to their male students. This can be due to the fact that boys in the eyes of the teacher should face more difficulties in the real life compared to girls. Thus girls achievement in class cannot be credited so much and boys' low performance is overlooked due to the false perception that girls will face less difficulties compared to boys. After considering these gendered discourses and their mechanism, only then it might be possible to do a number of things to reduce their adverse effects. Initially, teacher education and staff meetings can be a great venue to raise gender issues. Second, supplementing these gender biases and discourses with alternative discourses can be considered a fruitful approach. For instance, With regards to 'Girls as good language learners', the possible discourse to substitute this gendered language as Sunderland proposes can be "(a) not all girls are good language learners, and many boys are, (b) that most girls are good at other subjects too, (c) that language articulating the 'Girls as good language learners' discourse may make this discourse a self-fulfilling prophecy, and an unhelpful one at

that” (Biglar Beigi, 2008, p. 1).

Another area of concentration in our discussion in regards to gendered language is student-student talk. From my own personal experience, when female teachers go to the class for the first time, the students do not take them seriously which brings to the mind the gendered discourse that female teachers cannot handle class as efficiently as their male counterparts. Although in some countries such as Malaysia, students do not have such a gendered mentality towards their female teachers. In this case we can conclude that this instance of gendered discourse once again is within the bounds of culture and situation. This can be due to the fact that my teaching experience happened in Iran where women in society despite their academic qualification do not enjoy the same opportunities to show their credentials at the working place.

Concerning gendered discourse in the sphere of classroom, the following transcript is presented as an example of gendered attitudes embedded in teacher-student and student-student talk.

Student A(FEMALE): Mr.Smith...I never understand this math problem.
Student B(MALE): (laughter) what do you understand then?
Teacher(MALE): oh oh .. keep it down. O.K. my dear. I can explain to you again. No need to be shy. You can ask questions.
Student B(Male): She is always shy. Other girls are too.
Teacher (Male): They are far better than you. You are so talkative...(ESL class in Malaysia)

The above transcript demonstrates some utterances produced in an English class between a teacher with his male and female students. Although the utterances include no sexist words, the whole transcript is surrounded with gendered discourses, being undignified to the female student in a class where supposedly male and female students should both have equal rights. Student B implies some gendered discourses reflecting sexist attitudes towards Student A. However, he might not have been aware of his gendered language. Notwithstanding this fact, the teacher who should have been disinterested

used the affection word “dear” and showed a protective attitude towards the female student in this piece of discourse.

The last area of concentration from the perspective of a layman may not seem to be related to gendered discourse, although it should be emphasized that even written texts are communicating with the reader, therefore they can produce gendered discourses by nature. Hellinger (1980) as a native German carried out a detailed study of 131 passages from three English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks taught in German schools. She found that while men were modeled in over 93% of the passages, only 30% of characters were women. Similarly, men were depicted in various occupations, whilst the number of female speakers compared to their male counterparts comprised a very small percentage and that women were infrequently portrayed in activities that are considered demanding or interesting. In a process of developing a gender-conclusive dictionary, Graham (1975) referred to nouns employed to depict either sex. They confirmed that despite the presence of women in the real world, these textbooks demonstrated men as seven times more than women and boys were depicted nearly twice as many of their females counterparts. Nevertheless, the occurrence of the word *mother* was relatively higher compared to that of *father*. Overall these two studies done by Hellinger (1980) and Graham (1975) pointed out this fact that the dominating speaker or characters in textbooks were conceived to be male. Although we can criticize quoting these two studies in the present article, we should also take note of the fact that even in more recent studies, subtle sexism still exists. The following are the recent studies concerning this issue:

Otlowski (2003) more recently witnessed the most noticeable failing in Expressway 1, an English textbook catering for the needs of EFL/ESL learner at the Elementary level, which is “the lack of depiction of women in roles other than those of homemakers and mothers”(p. 15). As Otlowski (2003) holds there were seventeen illustrations depicting working situations. In these illustrations, out of these seventeen, twelve men and only five were of women. Moreover the dialogues taking place outside the home are modeled and represented to a great extent by male characters. An example of

Otlowski's (2003) critical analysis can lend a hand to a better comprehension of gender bias in the textbook. An example dialogue from Expressway 1 cited in Otlowski (2003, p.16) is shown below:

“Michi – where did you put the empty bottle -
Mrs. Brown - No, but there's a bottle bank in our local supermarket.
Michi - Maybe I should take this bottle there.
Mrs. Brown - Yes, on Saturday, when we do our shopping.”

The implication of this dialogue according to Otlowski is that both Michi and Mrs. Brown will go shopping on Saturday and the sociolinguistic meaning is that women do the shopping, which promotes the unfair stereotype of a woman doing the chores and keeping house. Although a word of caution is that If ‘Michi’ is a girl, ‘we’ may involve the speakers here and some people outside the dialogue and if it is a man, ‘we’ involves men and women doing the shopping, and ‘doing the shopping’ is something that gives ladies more prestige in the European world, different from the eastern tradition.

Most recently, Donie (2006) in a study concerning pictures in high school textbooks found that these pictures perpetuate stereotypes. High school textbooks in this study were collected from the education library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and analyzed.

Therefore, we can conclude that many current textbooks besides teacher talk and student/student talk produce gendered discourse and in the case of the above-mentioned studies, by drawing on critical discourse, it is apparent that these textbooks give an unfair picture of gender. The problem with those studies is that they do not draw on critical analysis terminology to explain the existence of sexist attitudes in the textbook and in a broader sense in classroom settings. Moreover, there is no emphasis on encouraging students to think critically in order to eliminate the effect of gendered discourse projected through textbooks and are often operated on a subliminal level.

HOW TO ELIMINATE THE IMPACT OF GENDERED DISCOURSES

The Key word to eliminate gendered discourses occurring in Teacher talk, student talk and instructional materials is conscious raising. Even though raising the awareness should be amalgamated by intervention, which results in going beyond the mainstream conscious raising. Sunderland (2004) suggested six such ways. The first way possibly would be ‘deconstruction of discourses through meta-discoursal critique’, that is to say academic critique including general research should focus on this line of research with greater depth. The other five approaches may go beyond this level. The second is ‘principled non-use of discourses seen as damaging’, which denotes this very fact that we should *not* say things like ‘Oh well, girls are just better language learners’. The third approach is named ‘principled but non-confrontational use of discourses perceived as non-damaging’, which means doing in ways such as proposed in the example above. The fourth is ‘principled, confrontational use of discourses perceived as non-damaging’. The most significant issue here is being *confrontational*. In her book Sunderland gives the example of a Fiat billboard ad of the 1970s which included a picture of the car and the words: ‘If it were a lady, it would get its bottom pinched’. On one billboard, a graffiti artist had spray-painted ‘If this lady was a car she’d run you down’. Of course, graffiti is not an option in all cultural contexts – but some form of confrontation (which may be quite subtle) probably is. The last way to intervene and confront with damaging discourse can be achieved through ‘facilitated group discoursal intervention by people other than discourse analysts/feminists’. For instance, nevertheless teachers and teacher educators may not consider themselves as feminist, they can verbalize notions such as success in all academic subjects are open to all. The sixth form of intervention in discourse she terms ‘rediscursivization’. This includes rearticulating and revisiting a phenomenon from an entirely different perspective to that regularly pursued. For example, as Biglar beigi (2008, p. 1) asserts it is possible “to see all-girls schools as depriving girls of ‘normal’

contact with the opposite sex (often a critique of such schools) – or as providing them with an opportunity for empowerment”. This will make them more prepared to confront with possible gender biases and discrimination as they leave school.

CONCLUSION

Once the above-mentioned studies of gendered bias are taken into consideration, they reveal the existence of strengthening gender bias notions in our EFL/ ESL textbooks and classroom settings. The possible solution to this problem as proposed in this article is to analyze critically the three areas of concentration concerning gender-biased issues in the classroom; teacher-talk to students, student to student talk and textbooks. By analyzing the areas we are much in line with the new trends following the third wave of feminism in which examining the effects of sexism experience are also taken into consideration. In this way fighting against sexism and gendered discourse is put into a more practical perspective.

As proposed earlier, by recognizing gendered discourses in the classroom settings, we can make students more aware of this sinister phenomenon flowing smoothly into educational settings and by conscious raising they become more aware of these gender-biased pictures in their textbooks. Moreover, encouraging students to think critically and call the gendered discourses flowing into the classroom settings under question seem to be the most satisfactory solution to eliminate the effect of gendered discourses. Meanwhile it is highly necessary to go beyond mainstream conscious raising with the aid and support of intervention.

Finally, if we are aware of these gendered discourses in the classroom settings and try to eliminate them by encouraging critical thinking, we set the ground for producing “gender equal discourses” in Sunderland’s (2004, p. 81) terminology. Due to the fact that as she believes, gender can be constructed “beyond words spoken and written” (p. 184).

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