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The Issue of Gender and Interaction in the L2 Classroom

Introduction

This article describes and discusses two very different approaches discernible in the research on gender and interaction in language classrooms. While the first, and earlier, approach aims at quantitative findings about gender-linked behaviour of classroom interactants, the second is concerned with the in-depth exploration and interpretation of classroom relationships and experiences, with gender as one of a multiplicity of influential discourses, ideologies and practices.

Starting with a cursory glance at the beginnings of interest in balanced, gender-equal learner participation, the article then concentrates on L2 classrooms and presents the results of some studies undertaken within the quantitative paradigm mentioned above, followed by a critical assessment of the underlying assumptions. Exemplary studies – one described in some detail – serve to illustrate the second, explorative and interpretative approach, again followed by a critical assessment. Finally, the article proposes some implications for teacher education and classroom practice.

1. Early interest in gender-equal classroom interaction

The interest in the relationship between gender and classroom interaction goes back to the 1950s.¹ In 1956, Meyer and Thompson presented a study on "Teacher interactions with boys, as contrasted with girls", followed in 1963 by Robert L. Spaulding's report on teacher-pupil transactions. The authors stated that male and female teachers alike paid more attention to boys than to girls. They listened to them longer, gave them more time to answer questions, and provided them with more feedback, both approving and disapproving. In 1978, Carol Dweck et al. confirmed these findings and specified the *kind* of evaluative feedback given to boys and girls, respectively. They found that the boys were regularly told off because of misdemeanour, but hardly ever for lack of intellectual competence, while the feedback for girls expressed doubts about their intellectual capabilities. Helga Kotthoff (2003: 85) summarises the tenor underlying these messages: the boys learnt that

¹ Helga Kotthoff (2003: 85) dates the beginnings around 1980, a period when this question received broader attention in the context of feminist probing into matters of gender education.

they could be achievers if they only tried, while the girls saw that the teachers appreciated their effort but deemed their academic potential insufficient.²

In 1980, Dale Spender looked into the assumption that, in mixed classes, girls talk less than boys do. In her self-study, she tried to divide her attention equally between girls and boys and was confident that she had succeeded. However, the tapes of her lessons revealed her self-deception: "the maximum time I spent interacting with the girls was 42% and on average 38%, and the minimum time with boys 58%" (1982: 56). Moreover, despite the generous attention paid to them, the boys had felt neglected during the teaching experiment.

Although Spender's project does not meet the standards of academic research – she neither reflected on her research methodology nor did she describe the contents and teaching/learning methods of her lessons – other researchers came to similar conclusions.³ Kelly, for instance, writes:

It is now beyond dispute that girls receive less of the teacher's attention in class [...]. It applies [to] all age groups [...] in several countries, in various socio-economic groupings, across all subjects in the curriculum, and with both male and female teachers. (Kelly 1988, quoted in Sunderland 1998/2002: 10)

All these studies assumed that the lack of attention granted to girls had an unfavourable impact on their education.⁴ The scholars, however, did not hold the teachers responsible. According to Brophy and Good (1974, cf. Yepez 1994/2006: 2), for example, they were "not the cause of the differences in the way males and females behave in the classroom and out: Rather, students enter the classroom with differences already inculcated in them by their families and by society, which their teachers then perpetuate."⁵

² "Jungen bekämen eher eine Botschaft mit dem Tenor 'Du könntest, wenn Du wolltest' und Mädchen eher eine mit dem Tenor 'Du hast Dir Mühe gegeben, aber es hat leider nicht gereicht'." (Kotthoff 2003: 85)

³ For schools in the FRG see, for example, Frasch & Wagner (1982).

⁴ "Classroom interactions between teachers and students put males in the spotlight and relegate females to the sidelines. Studies of teacher discourse underscore male dominance in the classroom. Teachers unconsciously make males the center of instruction and give them more frequent and focused attention. Some boys do not want this attention and some girls may not notice or may prefer this lack of attention [...]. The impact on both genders can be costly. Increased teacher attention contributes to enhanced student performance. Girls lose out in the equation. African American girls, for example, are assertive and outgoing when they enter school, yet they grow more passive and quiet through the school years [...]. Boys reap the benefits of a more intense educational climate." (Sadker 1999: 32)

⁵ In a similar vein, Christine Howe, in her research review *Gender and Classroom Interaction* (1997), concludes that "although classroom interaction builds on pre-school tendencies, it is probably not entirely determined by these. Thus, to the extent that it is relevant to gender divisions, it could be said to be actively promoting them." (47)

2. Studies on L2 classroom interaction within the quantitative paradigm

The studies mentioned so far did not focus on specific school subjects – their focus was on gender-specific behaviour across the curriculum. As for the L2 classroom, relatively few investigations have to date been carried out. Jane Sunderland (2004: 226) states that "questions about differential teacher treatment or male verbosity and the particular relationship of these asymmetries with language learning have been relatively unexplored", and speculates that it is the relative success of female language learners that has made the language classroom less interesting for gender research (2004: 236f.). Yet, a number of studies do exist, and when, in 2000, Sunderland published a research review and, one year later, Monika Chavez' *Gender in the Language Classroom* – "a comprehensive assessment of the relationships between gender, language learning, and language curricula" (James F. Lee in his foreword to Chavez 2001) – appeared, both contained a section on interaction. In the following, I shall list some typical findings taken from these, as well as from my own study of relevant literature, with the aim of providing an idea of the perspective, scope and value of these research activities.

2.1 Examples of studies within the quantitative paradigm

Studies investigating type and amount of gender-related classroom talk typically focus on teacher-student/student-teacher and student-student interaction. I shall take up this distinction here:

(1) Teacher-student/student-teacher interaction

- Julia Batters (1986), dealing with the question of whether "boys really think languages are just girl-talk", found that, in student-to-teacher talk, boys dominated in oral communication and participatory activities (cf. Sunderland 2000: 208).
- Eva Alcón (1994), exploring "the role of participation and gender in non-native speakers' classroom interaction" in Spain, found that, again in student-to-teacher talk, "the boys used significantly more solicits than did the girls" (cf. Sunderland 2000: 209).
- Jane Sunderland's own study on teacher-to-student talk in a German-as-a-Foreign-Language classroom, conducted in 1996, did not show differential treatment on most levels, with the exception of solicits: the boys received more non-academic (disciplinary) solicits, the girls more academic ones. "These findings suggest that the teacher was actually treating – or, arguably, *constructing* – the girls as the more academic students." (Sunderland 2000: 208, cf. Sunderland 2002: 11ff.)
- Fran Munro (1987) examined Australian adult ESL classrooms and found that the majority of teacher questions addressed the male participants. Janet Holmes' (1994) further analysis of Munro's data showed males taking longer

and more turns in most groups and twice as many long turns as compared to the females (cf. Chavez 2001: 107).

- On the other hand, in Mary Yenez' (1994/2004) "observation of gender-specific teacher behaviour" in adult ESL classes, the teachers treated female and male learners equally.

(2) Peer interaction

- Robert Politzer (1983) reported that, according to his study, female learners were more likely than males to seek interaction with L2 speakers outside the classroom (cf. Chavez 2001: 107, 27).

- Susan Gass and Evangeline Marlos Varonis (1986) analysed the language behaviour of Japanese learners of English and found that "cross-gender dyads yielded greater amounts of negotiated interaction [...] than did same-gender dyads. They further determined that females produced more signals than their male peers." (Cf. Chavez 2001: 107)

- Monika Chavez' own self-report survey of interaction in German as a Foreign Language classrooms yielded many insights, among them the fact that in classrooms with "numeric dominance (60% or more) of a particular gender [...] the female students responded significantly differently [...] on a number of issues". She concludes that "the gender composition of the group can reinforce or alter gender-linked behaviour" (Chavez 2001: 107).

What are we to make of these and the many other studies in that vein? What are their merits and their limitations?

2.2 Critical assessment

In terms of methodology, the above studies can be related to the quantitative and deductive paradigm in social research. According to Klaus Amann and Stefan Hirschauer (1997: 8), its main thrust is to produce factual knowledge and objectivist discourses about social reality by using standardised and mathematical research instruments.⁶ The investigations under scrutiny here take the binary notion of gender as a premise and, starting from there, display an interest in the amount, range, and type of gender-related interactional behaviour. They generalise specific observations and subsume them under the overarching idea of gender. Although some of the studies reveal surprising constellations and offer excellent starting points for further research and teacher self-reflection, their approach, in itself, raises serious questions:⁷

⁶ "Ihr rhetorischer Duktus ist die beweisführende Tatsachenfeststellung, ein Anspruch, mit standardisierten und mathematisierten Instrumenten objektivistische Diskurse über die vermessene soziale Wirklichkeit zu führen." (Amann & Hirschauer 1997: 8)

⁷ In an overview of studies published by the mid-1980s, Janet Lindow et al. (1985) acknowledged their arbitrariness and conceptual weakness: "It would not be difficult for us to develop a long list of understudied topics. But it seems that the serious weakness of the research is a theoretical one: The studies do not proceed from or lead to well-integrated theories." (12)

(1) Based on the ontological premise of a prediscursive, i.e. presocial, gender dichotomy, the studies rely on everyday knowledge instead of investigating it. For Amann and Hirschauer (1997: 13) such use of everyday knowledge as a "resource" rather than a research question is amateurish and stops scholars from embarking on an expedition beyond naturalised discourses.

(2) The focus of these interaction studies is on the variable gender, removing it from its wider context and ignoring its pervasiveness, social "contamination" and hybridity.

(3) The scope of the studies does not go far beyond surface-level interaction. By focusing on types of utterance - approval, admonition, question, solicit, etc. - and disregarding the dimension of interpersonal relationships, they stay within the horizon of observable classroom interactions, thus mapping only the tip of the iceberg.⁸ They neglect contexts and non-verbal modes of interactions, acknowledged as crucial in critical pedagogy.⁹ In addition to the neglect of such immanent aspects of (not only) language classes, the studies often ignore outside influences on classroom interaction.

(4) They tend to compare and generalise average values, thus conveying an inaccurate impression. In her 1996 study of a German-as-a-FL-class in England, Jane Sunderland (2002) showed that merely two boys out of 14 were responsible for the above-average attention paid to the male group as a whole. Had the remaining 12 boys been compared to the 13 girls, the teacher's attention would have appeared equally divided. In contrast to the similarity between the groups, the variations within them were considerable.¹⁰

(5) The studies correlate factors without analysing or questioning their relationship. Thus, they link interactional behaviour to learning success.¹¹ They are, therefore, often speculative, sometimes without being explicit about it.

⁸ "Students can make almost any site in the educational environment free of surveillance by colluding in constructing a culture of underlife behavior. They can develop gestures, signs, and symbols that can enable them to interact and communicate in their own terms right under the teacher's [and the researcher's, HDC] nose." (Canagarajah 2004: 121)

⁹ "Because there are texts that exist predominantly in nonlinguistic modes, such as the visual and gestural, Stein argues that multimodal pedagogies recognize that language, as a linguistic system, cannot fully express the arc of human experience." (Norton & Toohey 2004: 4)

¹⁰ This is in line with my own observations of a videotaped EFL lesson with first graders - nine girls, two boys - in a Vienna Primary School (Decke-Cornill 2005: 212). At first sight, the behavioural differences between the boys and the girls seem striking. A close viewing of the video, however, reveals the diversity of each group as well as the many similarities between them.

¹¹ "[...] [T]hey make a problematic assumption that a high amount of interaction is, in itself, a positive phenomenon that leads to higher achievement. In reality, it is quite possible that some students may speak up quite frequently but progress very little, if at all, while others who contribute little to classroom discussions, for individual or cultural reasons, may succeed in accomplishing their own language learning goals." (Pavlenko 2004: 58)

(6) They neither sufficiently consider the influence of the research activities on the research field nor the researchers' involvement in its perception and analysis.

3. Studies on L2 classroom interaction within the explorative and interpretative paradigm

While the studies discussed above have the common aim of discovering, measuring and comparing gender-linked interactional patterns and routines in classroom talk, a number of other studies have been published that illuminate interaction and gender in a different, more open critical framework, employing explorative and interpretative research methods. As in the previous paragraph, I shall present examples (some cursorily, one in some detail) and then offer a critical assessment.

3.1 Examples of studies within the explorative and interpretative paradigm

The following three examples share a concern with the question of identity in the context of interaction and language learning, a concern that is at the heart of the studies in this paradigm.

- Though not strictly falling into the category of *classroom* interaction, Meryl Siegal's (1994, 1996) often quoted ethnographic examination of four Western women learning Japanese in Japan provides an interesting insight into the conflicting identity options imposed on language learners. When the four women became aware of gender-specific (female) forms of spoken Japanese, they related these to the place of Japanese women in society (which they perceived as humble) and refused to use them at the deliberate expense of appearing native-like.¹² Instead of conforming to gendered linguistic norms, they "created their own language system based on their perception [and rejection, HDC] of Japanese women's language and demeanor" (Siegal 1994: 648).

- Cheiron McMahill's (2001) case study also takes us to Japan, to an EFL class. The adult evening course, feminist in its outlook, was entitled "Colors of English". The background of the women participating was heterogeneous. They read a text by the American writer bell hooks on the topic of a Christian African-American mother's expectations regarding her daughter's life. In McMahill's study, the discussion of the literary text prepared a common ground for the interactants to negotiate the promises and pains of non-standard lives. The "Colors of English"-class considered the role of English as both imperialist *and* "a weapon for self-empowerment" (332). The women's statements proved that they were acquiring new and valuable ways of perception and expression. Comparing English with Japanese, they found "that

having to specify personal pronouns in English constantly drew their attention to the distinctions between their own opinions and those of their interlocutors and helped them to clarify their thoughts" (333).

- Jerri Willett's (1995) study, presented here in detail, examines the L2 socialisation of first graders in an international school on a college campus in the U.S.A. Willett describes "how the unique sociocultural ecology of a particular first-grade classroom shaped the children's use of interactional routines and strategies" (474). For her, language socialization is a two-way process that "occurs through the micropolitics of social interaction" (475). Willett's year-long case study focused on four children categorised as LEP (limited English proficiency): three girls (Maldivian, Palestinian and Israeli) and a boy (Mexican-American). They were members of a class distinctly divided into two subcultures of girls and boys.

The four ESL children had a half hour's pullout class each day. Soon the three girls became friends and their teacher allowed them to sit together. The only male ESL child's home language was Spanish, a language spoken fluently by six bilingual boys in the class. Willett closely studied the ESL children's behaviour during phonics seatwork. In the course of the first month, they sat in the first row, observing what went on around them. A bilingual assistant helped them understand the assignments. Adults were the primary discourse partners during that month, and the children acquired the pupil role during the transactions with them. While the adult/child interactions did not develop significantly over the year, the child/child interactions did. The trio became a very productive team - against the odds because teamwork was not officially sanctioned (the teacher's ideal was individual work) and girls typically formed friendship pairs. They steadily increased their linguistic competence as well as their social standing. They appropriated prefabricated language chunks picked up from their transactions with the teachers, but went beyond mere repetition, engaging in linguistic experimentation and the production of rhythmic monologues and nonsense sounds, and playfully assumed different roles. Over the months, they learned

to construct meaning rather than merely stringing prefabricated chunks together; they can interpret meaning from written symbols; they have acquired such academic norms as 'read the text closely' [...]; they have constructed identities as active and competent students [...]; they have established relations as teammates [...]; and they use Mrs. Singer's [the teacher's, HDC] ideology about the 'dignity and value of work' (a phrase used by Mrs. Singer) as warrants for their own behaviour [...]. (Willett 1995: 494)

With a focus on gender relations, Willett looked at the many intertwined "webs of significance" (Geertz 1973) at work in the classroom community. The teacher's practice of seating boys next to girls in order to control classroom behaviour did not affect the closed gender communities. Xavier, the ESL boy, did not ask his female neighbours to help him, because that would have risked his status among the boys, whose mode of expression he attempted to share.

¹² Similar issues have been explored by other scholars, among them Yumiko Ohara (2001).

Participating in

the highly public and sometimes illicit language that could be heard as the boys shouted out in response to the teacher's elicitation [...] was one way that he attempted to construct an identity that was acceptable to the other boys (e.g., the boys reacted positively to his public contributions by joining in and laughing). The ESL girls never engaged in these public displays. In fact, there was no evidence that they paid attention to it. Recordings of the girls' subvocalization showed that they frequently repeated what they heard the teacher say but never repeated the illicit language of the boys. (Willett 1995: 496)

Xavier was in a dilemma: He could not ask for help from his female seat-mates nor get in touch with his male bilingual classmates. The only help he could get was that of the adults who, "because they believed that every child deserved attention (a pervasive ideological position), [...] could not spend much time with a child" (ibid.). Unlike the girls, who made joint use of many resources, Xavier only received the limited input granted him by the adults. As a result,

it appeared as if the girls were independent workers (a high-status identity in the teacher's eyes). Xavier, on the other hand, without alternate sources for help, would ask for help from adults more often. Consequently, he began to gain an identity as a needy child who could not work independently. (ibid.: 497)

The extra assistance he got from the adults, e.g. more pullout classes and additional books, served to emphasise his neediness and threatened to make him an outsider, a position strengthened by the fact that he was a working-class child in a campus school whose personnel believed "that children from the *barrio* were semilingual" (ibid.). Xavier succeeded in gaining and maintaining a high social position among the boys. The adults, however, did not trust his academic aptitude. When he scored a Level 4 (out of 5, Level 5 being the most proficient) on the Bilingual Syntax Measure, he had to remain in ESL pullout class, while the three girls, who had scored the same level, could leave because they had gained the status of pupils capable of working independently.

This and similar studies suggest that classroom interaction practices are assigned values in the context of local ideologies of language, class, and gender. Consequently, learners whose participation patterns are aligned with the dominant culture of learning may be evaluated higher than those who espouse alternative beliefs about appropriate classroom behaviors. In turn, students whose voices are not being acknowledged in the classroom may lose their desire to learn the language or may even engage in passive resistance to classroom practices and curriculum demands. (Pavlenko 2004: 59)

3.2 Critical assessment

The following arguments run parallel to the arguments assembled in my critical assessment of the quantitative studies above (2.2).

(1) The examples presented in 3.1 move away from an interest in gender-specific features ("being gender", "behaving gender") to a more process-oriented gender concept ("doing gender"). Yet they remain based on the assumption of a binary gender order. Thus, they, too, examine the social construction of binary gender *and* take that order as starting point. In order to avoid this trap, gender researchers need to suspend their empirical everyday knowledge, adopt an attitude of artificial naïveté or develop ways of gender-neutralising data.¹³

(2) The researchers' interest is in "identities as multiple, conflictual, negotiated, and evolving" (Canagarajah 2004: 117) and in subject experience and identity formations in interaction. They do not abstract gender and interaction from social, linguistic and situational contexts.

(3) On the level of methodology, they prefer narrative and ethnographic designs and concentrate on local milieus and on individuals in their unique contexts, carefully re-constructing processes of subject development in interaction. They convey their findings in "thick descriptions" (Geertz 1973). Despite their local stance, they frequently go beyond the classroom and include off-school influences on classroom interaction.

(4) Unconcerned with abstract and generalised language learners as "bundles of variables" (Kington 2004: 220), they do not need to tackle the problematic relation between average values and variations that is typical of quantitative designs. However, they, too, have to deal with the problem that "all research involves *some* cleansing when turning raw material into data" (Leung et al. 2004: 263), which raises the "serious epistemological question of what counts as data" (262). For Leung et al. the answer is "to seek a conceptual framework that acknowledges, rather than obscures, the messiness of the data while nevertheless still holding fast to the analytic agenda set in advance" (263). In addition to methods like triangulation and critical discourse analysis, they use non-linear data collection and ample room for alternative readings to legitimise their interpretations.

¹³ Gildemeister (2000: 221) lists some of the strategies conducive to this agenda: "Positiv gewendet bedeutet das, eine Forschungskultur zu entwickeln, in der systematisch vermieden wird, lediglich bekannte Figuren (und Stereotype) der Geschlechterdifferenz zu reproduzieren (und damit zu reifizieren). Dazu ist es hilfreich, wenn - vermieden wird, 'Männer' und 'Frauen' als Blöcke in essenziellierender Weise miteinander zu vergleichen oder 'Geschlecht' als fragile Ressource der Forschung einzusetzen; - das Alltagswissen um die Differenz bei der Entwicklung von Fragestellungen kontrolliert wird, indem es z.B. abwechselnd explizit gemacht und dann wieder gezielt ausgeblendet wird; - Forschungsphasen zeitlich entzerrt werden und in bestimmten Phasen der Auswertung das Material 'de-sexualisiert' wird [...]; - 'Cross-gender'-Aktivitäten und -Räume untersucht werden, um sich für Vielfalt, Widersprüche und Ambiguitäten alltäglicher Praxis zu öffnen und die Praxis der Unterscheidung selbst zu analysieren."

(5) Instead of jumping to conclusions, e.g. about the correlation between interactional behaviour and language learning achievement, they "first ask what meaning routines and strategies have in the local culture and how they enable learners to construct positive identities and relations and manage competing agendas" (McMahill 2001: 499).

(6) In theory, the explicit reflection about the impact of research on the research field and the researcher's involvement in its perception is a crucial component of this paradigm. In practice, it is rare. Cynthia Nelson's "Sexual Identities in ESL: Queer Theory and Classroom Inquiry" (1999) is a notable exception. "[A]cknowledging the particularity of [her] own perspectives, interests, and limitations as researcher" (380f.), Nelson allows the readers an insight into her sense-making processes and speculations during her observation of a class discussion on the topic of women walking arm in arm and men holding hands. As a rule, however, these studies share with those presented before a disregard of the researchers' involvements in their findings.

4. Some implications for teacher education and classroom practice

It will be evident by now that – despite my awareness of the important revelations of the former – my sympathies lie with the latter type of studies. Received with much scepticism because of their diversity, specificity and potential "messiness" (see above), they have gained acceptance in academia. In accordance with the linguistic and narrative turn in Social Studies, they insist that truth is only accessible within the social and discursive processes of communities of practice. They hold that the positions, perspectives and discourses available to people inform their knowledge. The idea of direct access to reality is considered a logical fallacy; access depends on perception, and perception, in turn, depends on the situation and concepts of the perceiver. All our knowledge is much more our making than a representation of the world.

What, then, is the value of this type of explorative research?

Interaction is a very complex and fuzzy concept. It is crucial to our understanding of our selves and the world. Without social interaction, we would not know who we are. Social interaction allows us to acquire, contest and negotiate our identities. Since identities are located in discourses and narratives, we need interaction to tackle those imposed on us and to discover identity options open to us.

The explorative studies demonstrate the complexity of language learning. They give evidence of the influence of our social relations inside and outside the language classroom on how we think and feel about the new language, on how we acquire it, on how we use it. They do not isolate language learning from the entanglements of our position in the classroom and elsewhere. These qualities make such studies valuable for teacher education, because

they illustrate convincingly that language teaching and learning need a complex psycho-socio-pedagogical framework for the students to feel safe¹⁴ and ready to embark upon the difficult task of learning a foreign language in interaction with other learners and of making that language part of their selves.

Guided by the principles of critical feminist pedagogies, Aneta Pavlenko (2004: 67) provides a list of features characterising such an L2 classroom and curriculum:

(a) creation of programs suited to the needs of particular populations in order to ensure equal access and equal educational opportunities for all students; (b) acknowledgment of the students' multiple identities and multilingual realities; (c) incorporation of various forms of linguistic and cultural capital brought into the classroom by the students; (d) atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, and community that recognizes similarities and differences among the participants and allows for multiple viewpoints and positions; (e) personalization of instruction through incorporation of the students' own experiences; (f) shared leadership and presence of cooperative structures such as collaborative projects; (g) consciousness-raising with regard to how social contexts impact learning trajectories as well as with regard to researchers' and teachers' own subjective stances and involvements; (h) continuous exploration of commonalities and differences in the discourses of gender and sexuality across cultures and communities in order to help students develop a "multi-voiced consciousness".

This is not to say that gender, sexual and other identity issues should continuously be at the centre of language classroom interactions. As a young gay FL/SL learner interviewed recently by Bettina Kleiner and me explained, it would be sufficient if teachers created an atmosphere in which *all* the participants of a language class could feel comfortable and included.

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¹⁴ For discussions of the notion of "safety" in language classes see, for example, Nelson (1993), Vandrick (1997), Canagarajah (2004).

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