

LANGUAGE, GENDER AND TESOL

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How can teachers make use of language and gender research to help second language learners? Interpreting this research can seem like negotiating a minefield, as Deborah Cameron makes clear in her recent work on the topic of "verbal hygiene" (Cameron, 1994, 1995). She uses the term to describe "a diverse set of activities linked by the idea that some ways of using language are functionally, aesthetically or morally preferable to others" (1994, p.383). These activities include the Plain English movement, campaigns against sexist and racist language, and presumably the activities of teachers who define the norms that their students should be aiming for.

Most teachers have a clear idea of the kind of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary they regard as an appropriate target or norm for their ESOL learners. In New Zealand, this norm is often the standard variety of New Zealand English used by newsreaders such as Judy Bailey and Neil Waka. But what should teachers be doing about presenting learners with gender-appropriate norms for using language?

The problem is not a trivial one. There is now an extensive volume of research documenting the ways in which women differ from men in the ways they use English (eg Tannen, 1990; Coates, 1993; Holmes 1995). We know, for instance, that women tend to use standard forms more often than men, while men use more vernacular or non-standard forms than women. So a woman is more likely to say to her friend *Next thing I saw the kid walking into the house*, where a man might say to his mate *Next thing I seen the kid walkin' into the 'ouse*. Women tend to contribute less than men in more formal contexts such as meetings (and classrooms). Women tend to interrupt men less often than the reverse. Women generally provide more encouraging feedback (*mm, right, uh-huh*) to a speaker and positively build on the contributions of others. Women tend to disagree by using qualified statements (*well I'm not sure that's quite accurate; you could look at it another way couldn't you*) while men are more likely to baldly contradict others (*rubbish; I just can't agree*). Women and men often use the same forms differently. So women tend to use tag questions (eg *isn't it; don't you*) and hedges (such as *you know* and *sort of*) in ways which facilitate the participation of others in the conversation (*she's been sort of a bit off-colour recently you know hasn't she?*). By contrast, men tend to use such phrases in a way which qualifies the validity of their statements (*I think it was sort of scraggly and green wasn't it?*). Very broadly, we can characterise women's interaction strategies as cooperative in orientation, emphasising rapport and connection, rather than focussing on information and status differences.

While this list greatly simplifies patterns that vary in different social contexts, it will serve to provide an indication of the kinds of problems confronting the ESOL teacher. First of all there is the question of whether these patterns are accurate for the learners' target group. If

you are teaching a group of teenagers from Cambodia or Taiwan, then whose norms are appropriate? Do the patterns described in the language and gender research literature reflect the patterns used by English-speaking Auckland teenagers, who might represent appropriate role models for your learners? It is important to use accurate models in the classroom.

It is also important to use socially relevant models and this raises a much more complicated issue. Should the second language teacher present female students with models of the way New Zealand females speak when some would argue that these patterns disadvantage females. Some feminist linguists argue that women's ways of talking reflect women's subordinate status. In other words, they suggest that women use cooperative strategies because they do not have the power to achieve their goals in more direct ways. Should we be teaching second language learners to collude in communication patterns which reinforce the powerless position of women in society? Others argue that female talk strategies reflect caring and concern for others, and a desire to establish positive relationships which is evident in many other aspects of female behaviour. These strategies will benefit learners by eliciting positive reactions and encouraging others to interact with the learners.

If we ignore differences in the ways women and men talk in the target community, our students are likely to sound sociolinguistically bizarre. A male who uses consistently standard pronunciations in conversation with friends in the pub is likely to be perceived as stand-offish and over formal. And females who baldly disagree or who use very direct forms (*Get this typed by three o'clock*) are often negatively evaluated.

I will discuss just one specific example - the case of compliments - to demonstrate how the ESOL teacher can draw on research describing gender differences in the use of English. Compliments are easy to teach because they are so formulaic. Most use a very small number of lexical items and a very narrow range of syntactic patterns. A small range of adjectives (eg *nice, good, beautiful, lovely, wonderful*) recurred in over two thirds of New Zealand compliments, and the majority of non-adjectival compliments used one of a small range of positive verbs, with *like* or *love* alone accounting for 80% of the New Zealand data¹. And syntactically, most compliments use one of four simple patterns (Wolfson, 1983; Holmes, 1986).

Research in a number of English-speaking communities suggests women generally pay more compliments than men (Holmes, 1988; Wolfson, 1984; Herbert, 1990). This is further evidence of women's tendency to use language to establish rapport, connection and

¹ The data on compliments was collected from predominantly Pakeha New Zealanders. We don't yet know, therefore, whether these compliment patterns are similar among Maori and people from other ethnic groups.

solidarity with others. In terms of the topics of compliments, women tend to receive most compliments on their appearance, and they compliment each other most often on aspects of their appearance (eg *I love that scarf, What a great hair-do*). Pakeha New Zealand men also receive appearance compliments, but significantly fewer than women, and the great majority come from women. In America, by contrast, Wolfson comments that American men rarely receive appearance compliments from men or women. Possessions are a much more common topic of compliments for men (eg *That's a neat bike, Nice car*).

Compliments differ in frequency in different cultures. Indonesians and Malaysians, for example, comment on the high frequency with which New Zealanders and Americans pay each other compliments. These differences are compounded by gender differences. Women from cultures where compliments are rare, experience them as embarrassing. They often respond inappropriately to compliments from native speakers of English by disagreeing or rejecting them. On the other hand, they may not offer enough compliments, by the standard of Pakeha New Zealanders, especially to their English-speaking women friends. Conversely, men from cultures where appearance compliments between males are acceptable may embarrass their Pakeha New Zealand male friends.

So while the linguistic features of compliments are easy to acquire, learning how to use compliments appropriately is not so easy. Each speech community has norms of use involving the relative frequency of compliments, the kinds of topics which may be the focus of a compliment and the contexts in which compliments are appropriate, mandatory or perhaps even proscribed. These norms interact with the gender of speakers and addressees, so that knowing who to compliment, how, and when is a sophisticated aspect of sociolinguistic competence.

For those concerned with taking account of feminist perspectives, the issue is even more complicated. Should we be teaching female learners to behave in ways which conform to disempowering stereotypes? Or could such patterns be justified by an alternative and more positive interpretation - as evidence of women's concern to establish positive relationships with others? One solution is to discuss such issues explicitly in the classroom. We need to provide students with as much socio-cultural information as possible - including information on gender differences and their potential interpretations. We need to tell them about the ways English is used in the target community, comparing these norms explicitly where possible with the patterns observed in their own communities. We should attempt to convey the socio-cultural values which underlie the patterns, so that students can analyse and understand the way language is used. Then it is the students' choice how to use this information - to conform to the norms or to flout them as they judge appropriate. So, if he has been well taught, a male ESOL learner who tells his male teacher *You look wonderful!* will do so in the full knowledge that his behaviour breaks a range of conventions and conveys a number of interesting potential messages!

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