

TEACHER GENDER-RELATED INTERACTION IN UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

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Abstract

Gender equity has always been a broadly discussed issue. The number of studies and publications nowadays shows that this issue will prevail for a long period of time. There are controversies on gender equity in the Albanian society as well. The perception that males do better than females in many fields, persists even in our academic environments. Sometimes teachers unconsciously encourage male domination in the classroom by giving them more attention than females.

This research explores teacher-student and student-student interaction, focusing on gender and teacher communication style regarding it. The analysis is based on data collected from the observation of the classroom interaction in two university classes, slightly dominated by males. They are monitored over a period of 15 weeks. The aim is to show how the language used in interactions contributes to gender inequity. It is also observed whether the teachers are aware of their interaction regarding gender bias. The results indicate conclusions fairly different from what theory suggests. Although teachers are educated to promote gender equity they rarely do it.

Key words: *biased language, classroom interaction, gender equity, teacher's role.*

Introduction

A great number of studies show that males and females undergo different treatment in society. These studies highlight the fact that gender inequity is still a hot global issue. Males are looked up as the future breadwinners, and consequently every effort is made to fit them for an honourable career in life (Lohse, Johanne 1884).

This image of men is still prevailing even in the Albanian society. Gender equity and Women's rights are topics of literature but they hardly become reality. Strict, traditional, unspoken rules force girls and women to remain silent "in the corner" of the society.

Education is said to be the vanguard for boys and girls, men and women to prosper equally and have equal opportunities. If education achieves gender equity, it will contribute to the reduction of the conflicts between sexes in society. Education implies teaching. Teaching implies knowledge. Knowledge is the truth. The truth is everywhere the same. Hence education should be everywhere the same (Hutchins, Maynard, 2003).

Teachers are one of the most important sources of knowledge in the classroom. Although they should be the "guardian" of the gender equity in the classroom, sometimes unconsciously, through their interaction, they encourage male domination. They make males the focus of attention by overt or hidden forms of communication.

Although some studies show that the nature of males and females is genetically determined to some degree (Sommers, 2000), some others conclude that variations in cognition result from males' and females' different experiences, not from biological causes (Richardson, 1997; Streitmatter, 1994).

It is impossible to interfere in what is genetically constructed. All can be studied and improved, is the role of the teachers and their duty to acknowledge male and female abilities and give them equal opportunities for prosperity.

Problem of Research

This study explores teacher-student and student- student interaction in order to highlight how gender perceptions and expectations shape these classroom interactions. It aims to show that teachers through unconscious belief over the gender related capability of the student limit the opportunities of many others in the class. It also shows that most of the time teachers fail to accept gender equity and they are not aware about the stereotyped forms of teaching that they use. They create a problematic environment for all the students because they are nurtured with the idea and belief that gender related limits, in knowledge acquisition, exist.

This study shows how practices like gender related expectations, teaching methods, classroom arrangement and management, language used etc; do seriously harm students' gender beliefs and values. It will also attempt to leave behind the belief that gender stereotypes based on cultural tradition should continue to be cultivated even in the classroom. Students should no longer be bred with the assumption that males take on roles that require instrumental characteristics. These characteristics, such as independence, assertiveness, and dominance, are also personality attributes that are valued in those in power positions in our society. On the other hand expressive characteristics generally are assumed to be found more often in females. Dependence, passivity and submission are traits valued for more nurturing of "feminine" activities, rather than for those in decision-making positions (Csikszentmihaly, 1988).

Research Focus

The study attempts to investigate and highlight implications that derive from classroom performances shaped by gender differences, and the belief that males and females are different. Based on an observation and data analysis, it proves that this belief leads to gendered biased class environment with harmful effects on the future values of the students. The study is organised in two main phases. Firstly, classroom interaction is observed and the information gathered by the observation is used to create a questionnaire, which was filled in by the students in the second phase. The results of the questionnaire were used to understand more on the perception of the students regarding gendered biased classroom interaction.

Methodology of Research

General Background of Research

Gender equity in education is supposed to promote students' talents and interests independent of their gender. Theoretically teachers are educated to be gender blind. Through their education they receive information and knowledge how to create equal opportunity environments for both male and female students. In their reports they show conscious effort to keep this equality overtly protected. Reality shows that the complex nature of gendered biased issue affects all the life of the classroom.

Teachers sometimes perpetuate male dominance in the classroom, when they (often unconsciously), make males the focus of instruction by giving them more frequent and meticulous attention (Sadker, 2000). In the Albanian society symbols about 'men's control', 'man made language' or 'patriarchal universe of discourse' are still strong. Males are the focus

of attention in the society. This makes the role of education fundamental in reshaping people's beliefs and attitudes regarding gender equity.

The purpose of this study is to make teachers aware of their classroom performance and interaction and their role in creating and promoting gender equity. Teacher's awareness is the first, most important step towards recognition and elimination of gendered based teaching. Teacher's awareness starts from the very beginning. If they give an equal start to the students, they warrant equal opportunity for all of them regardless their gender. This means that every student must be given the same level of instruction, attention and expectation at the beginning (Secada, 1989).

Sample of Research

177 students enrolled in Master studies in the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Tirana. 113 students were accepted in Master's in Teacher Education. Due to the general belief that teaching is a profession for females, classes resulted in an unequal number of females and males, 102 females and 11 males. These classes didn't constitute the perfect sample for the study. Subjects of the study are 64 students, accepted in Master Studies in Translation, in the Faculty of Foreign Languages. The number of males and females was equal and their academic achievement was equally strong because the students enrolled in the course should have a high GPA in Bachelor studies to be accepted in this program of studies. The study was conducted in two classes during the course of Public Speaking, taught in the second term of the academic year 2010-2011. This course lasted 15 weeks. Public Speaking course was a training ground, where students could develop skills that would serve them in their careers and in their communities.

Instrument and Procedures

Classrooms work as communities where students with different strengths and abilities come together to meet all of their needs in every level; academic, emotional and social. Students like people in a community, should work together to build a sense of trust care and support and teachers must make sure this happens (Hittie, 2000). Classrooms offer unique opportunities for the teachers to assess their work and to better understand their students. This research was conducted in classroom settings. It used two instruments of data collection. Firstly, an observation was conducted to collect information about the interaction in the classroom. The conceptual framework for the study was based on two main categorizations: 1- Teacher-student interaction, (all the teacher's utterances towards the students and students' utterances toward the teacher), 2- Student-student interaction, and (all the interaction that happened between classmates). For a more detailed study of the classroom interaction, the model of Shamai, Ilatov, Lazarovitz, & BenTsvi –Mayer, (1995), was adopted and the categories were subdivided in further variables. Teacher's flow of interaction was categorised as follows; academic reasons (offering academic instructions), students' motivation, students' evaluation, (receiving positive and negative feedback) and classroom arrangement and management. Student's interactions were further subdivided into spontaneous interaction or teacher initiated utterance.

Secondly, a questionnaire adapted from Chandler, P. S. (1994) was distributed among students at the end of the course. The aim of the questionnaire was to evaluate the implications that brought to students these forms of interaction. The same theoretical framework was used to break down 20 statements into 5 main sections. These sections are 1- Biased language, 2- Class management, 3- Motivation, 4-Evaluation, 5-Awareness. The questionnaire was chosen for this study, because of its many advantages as compared to other research instruments. It offered qualitative analysis of data collected from the first phase, allowed anonymity, was less

time consuming, allowed uniformity and students had enough time to respond to the questions. The Likert Scale was used for an accurate assessment. Students rated their agreement with each dimension, on a 5-point Likert scale from 5 (none of the time) to 1 (all the time) for five sections. Scales' reliability is very high. Students were asked to mark their gender in the gender section of the questionnaire.

The course of Public Speaking has recently been introduced in our curricula. The language of instruction is Albanian. The task of presenting speeches to the classroom is new to our students and they find it rather challenging. This course helps them to analyse audiences and topics, organise ideas, state general and specific purposes, construct outlines, assess evidence, and use language thoughtfully. This is a 6 credit course and is organised in 15 lectures and 30 hours of seminars. This form of organisation constituted a perfect ground of study because the students were surveyed in different situations. Three teachers held their lectures and organised their respective seminar classes. One teacher was male the other two were females.

The participants in the study had a mean age of 22.3 years. The study was organised in two main phases. Firstly, the observation process consisted on recording data from the lessons, coding and analysing them according to the theoretical framework. Secondly, the results of the observation were used to design the questionnaire for the students, for collecting more qualitative data.

Data Analysis

In the first phase of the study, teacher-student and student-student flow of interaction were analysed using the above mentioned theoretical framework. Keeping in mind the Albanian context, the analysis was focused primarily on materials and language used by the teachers. All the gendered biased materials and examples were counted and coded according to the theoretical framework under section 1. For example every time a teacher used "he", but meant both he/she was counted under the section of gendered biased language. The analysis was focused on motivation and its specifics like encouragement, confidence, and interruptions. If any of the teachers encouraged more males than females, or allowed males to interrupt females, this was coded under the section 2, the section of motivation, and counted as a male dominated behaviour. Attention was paid to class management by all the three teachers. Most of the attention was devoted to classroom norms, response etiquettes, time arrangement and group work. Every time a teacher favoured male dominance in class management this was marked under the section 3. Special consideration took evaluation and the assessment of the students' work and their tests. To elicit data for this section, everyday assessment, mid-term tests, and final tests were analysed. All the biased assessments of the teachers were counted under the section 4. Section 5 was generated as a need to measure the awareness of the students' regarding the gendered biased classroom interaction. The general perception from the observation was that students were not fully aware of the environment. To avoid any subjective conclusion, a questionnaire was designed according to the above mentioned theoretical framework, subdivided in 5 main sections and their 4 respective statements. The questionnaire was used to make an objective analysis of the data collected from the first phase.

Results of Research

Out of 64 students enrolled in the course 61 of them handed in the questionnaires. Three of the students enrolled in the course were absent. 93.4 % (57) of the questionnaires were valid, 6.6 % (4) of them were not filled or more than one option was marked. The questionnaires were assessed under gender variables. 52.6 % (30) of questionnaires were filled by male students and 47.4% (27) were filled by females. Findings of the questionnaire are presented in the table below.

Table 1. Statements and results of the questionnaire.

| Sections & Statements | Males | Mean number | Females | Mean number |
|--|-------|-------------|---------|-------------|
| Section 1 Language and materials | | | | |
| Albanian language has "maleness" as a standard. | 30 | 3.9 | 27 | 2 |
| Teachers use the generic "he". | 30 | 3.1 | 27 | 2.3 |
| Teachers use stereotyped language. | 30 | 4 | 27 | 2.5 |
| Teachers use stereotyped materials. | 30 | 4 | 27 | 2 |
| Section 2 Class management | | | | |
| Teachers are misbalanced in questioning. | 30 | 3.8 | 27 | 1.7 |
| Teachers misbalance time response. | 30 | 4.2 | 27 | 1.7 |
| Teachers offer unequal help to males and females. | 30 | 4.2 | 27 | 1.8 |
| Teachers offer unequal guidance to males and females. | 30 | 4 | 27 | 2 |
| Section 3 Motivation | | | | |
| Teachers encourage males more than females. | 30 | 4.3 | 27 | 1.2 |
| Teachers allow males to interrupt females. | 30 | 3.2 | 27 | 2.3 |
| Teachers allow stereotyped modes of address. | 30 | 3.7 | 27 | 1.9 |
| Teachers raise more the confidence of males than of females. | 30 | 3 | 27 | 2.4 |
| Section 4 Assessment | | | | |
| Teachers value more the work of males. | 30 | 2.7 | 27 | 2.1 |
| Tests are worded in gender biased fashion. | 30 | 4.2 | 27 | 1.8 |
| Teachers ask male oriented questions. | 30 | 4.1 | 27 | 2 |
| Teachers blame females for week preparation. | 30 | 2.7 | 27 | 2.1 |
| Section 5 Awareness | | | | |
| I am aware of gendered biased language and materials in the classroom. | 30 | 3.9 | 27 | 3 |
| I am aware of gendered biased class management. | 30 | 2.8 | 27 | 2.1 |
| I am aware of gendered biased motivation. | 30 | 2.2 | 27 | 2.3 |
| I am aware of gendered biased assessment. | 30 | 2.8 | 27 | 2.8 |

From the observation of the interactions of the teachers it was noticed, that the distribution of the interaction between males and females was not equal. Most of the flow was directed towards females. Anyhow exceptions were noticed during the first seminars where most of the interaction was focused on class discipline and was directed more to males than to females. As for the academic instructions and materials the attempts of the teachers to avoid gender biased tendency were minimal. The materials were far from gender sensitive ones. They were not balanced in the use of masculine and feminine suffixes (the Albanian language, makes use of suffixes to show gender), pronouns, masculine terminology, and examples. All the materials continuously ignored one gender. Even the language used, displayed the same problems as with the academic materials. The vocabulary used by the teachers was full of masculine, "generic he" and they rarely attempted to use inclusive language. Masculine generic terms dominated lectures and academic instructions during the seminar classes. From the questionnaire it was noticed that males believed that teachers do not use stereotyped language and material, (mean number 4), while females believed that Albanian language has "maleness" as a standard and that the materials the teachers used were stereotyped ones, (mean number 2). The average mean

numbers for this section, 3.75 for males and 2.22 for females, indicated that males did not consider language and materials used by the teachers as biased ones, while females sometimes did.

Information for motivation was rather hidden. Teachers encouraged both males and females to work. Most of the encouragement given to females was in the forms of vocalized pauses and nods, while males were given verbal praise. They were both encouraged to work harder but females were assisted more than males. Two of the teachers allowed more interruption while the other one (female teacher) was more sensitive towards it, and developed a system that required responders to raise hands or the teacher to call on them. The responses uttered without prior permission were not counted. The section of motivation in the questionnaire had the highest mean number, 4.3 for males under the category of encouragement. This showed that males strongly believed that teachers encouraged both genders the same. The lowest mean number was 1.2 for females under the same category which meant that females believed that teachers encouraged more males than females. The average mean numbers for this section were 3.55 for males and 1.9 for females. These numbers show the strong belief of the females that teachers' interaction mainly motivated males and not females.

Classroom management was dominated by gendered biased interaction. The female teachers established norms at the very beginning, while the male teacher didn't. They also set response etiquettes and called all the students by name. One of the teachers made all the students write their names in large capital letters and place them in front of their desk. Two of the teachers (female) allowed from 3-5 minutes pause time, before students answered to a question they had posed. The male teacher accepted even answers given without pause time. Classroom arrangement was of little interest for the teachers. At this level of education students are free to choose their desk. Teachers interfere only when they organize the classroom in group or team work. This happened only once during the course and the (male) teacher interfered only to make the groups equal in number. The groups resulted in unequal number of males and females. Mean numbers of this section were 4.06 for males and 1.8 for females. The results show that males perceived teachers' assistance as gender neutral while females as gender biased. The statements that scored higher for males (mean number 4.2) were those for time of response and help offered by the teachers. The statements that scored lower for females (mean number 1.7) were those for misbalanced questioning and time of response.

Assessment was a sensitive point for the students. All the teachers displayed clear tendency to devalue the work of females. Their judgment was based on gender expectancies more than on student performance. For the same level males were evaluated more than females. For weak performances blame was put more to the "difficult" question when the student was male. When the student was female, she was blamed for weak preparation. A merciful 5, the lowest passing mark, was given often to male students but hardly to females. They were encouraged to try harder next time. The average mean numbers for this section were 3.4 for males, and 2 for females. These numbers showed that males didn't believe that the evaluation of their performance was affected by their gender, while females believed the opposite.

The results gathered from the observation during the first phase, showed a gender biased environment in the classroom. In the two classes students mainly males uttered sentences without prior permission and often interrupted other students. They also used silence to show superiority towards females, considering them not worth of an answer. The language of all students was exclusive, full of stereotypes and sometimes they used stereotypical jokes. They felt free to comment on gender appropriate behaviour and appearance.

Table 2. Average mean numbers for each section.

| Sections | Average mean number Males | Average mean number Females |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Section 1. Biased language | 3.75 | 2.22 |
| Section 2. Class management | 4.06 | 1.8 |
| Section 3. Motivation | 3.55 | 1.96 |
| Section 4. Assessment | 3.4 | 2 |
| Section 5. Awareness | 3.32 | 2.06 |

Table 2 shows the average mean numbers for each section. The analysis of the figures shows students' gendered biased beliefs and perceptions regarding the issues observed during the interaction in classroom. The highest average mean number was scored under section 2, class management 4.06 for males. The lowest average number for females was 1.8 under the same section.

Discussion

This study aimed at investigating gendered biased classroom interaction, and its implications in students of university master studies. Findings show an overall biased environment. Teachers not aware of their interaction, reinforced these perception. Mean comparisons from the tables analysis show that males dominate the classroom interaction.

Section 1 analyses language and the material used in the classroom. It shows a mean 3.75 for males versus 2.22 for females. The data from the questionnaire reinforces the observation in the classroom that language and the materials used during the lesson period have a strong tendency towards a stereotypical behavior and traditional male characters. Albanian language uses "maleness" as a standard. Teachers and students, unfortunately even females, impose discursive norms such as "he" referring to both "s/he" reinforcing patriarchal features of Albanian society. Unconscious for the implication, they are confirming the binary understanding of norm and deviance that promotes male imagery, and makes women invisible (Spender,1990). The mean numbers that measure the awareness for this issue (3.9 males, 3.03 females) reinforce the idea that the students accept the maleness of the language and materials as a standard. They take it for granted rather than challenge it.

Section 2 analyses the class management. Findings in this section show that teachers are focused more on males than on females. They tend to ask more often males, assist and guide them and accept answers without wait time (average mean of the section 4.06 males, 1.8 females). The assistance offered to males was in the form of encouragement promoting a positive self-esteem to them. The opposite happened with females. Teachers solved the problem, making it easier for them. Often this form of assistance gives the perception that they are not able to deal with it, contributing negatively in females self-esteem. Males often interrupted females, showing a sign of superiority.

Teachers failure to control class management brought about the issue of silence as well. Sometimes males used silence as a tool to show power. Studies show that control is not always a matter of monopolizing "air-time" or of other forms of overt bullying. Control can be exercised through refusing to talk or through making someone else talk. An individual's conversational contribution is evaluated in retrospect, and in as much as silence can signal the inappropriateness or unsatisfactoriness of the preceding turn, it can be a powerful tool for devaluing contributions (Edelsky, C. 1981; Houston, M.,Kramarae, C. 1991).

The findings show that the motivation scale in section 3, table 2 is low for females compared to males which is rather high (3.55 males, 1.96 females). Teachers didn't offer the same degree of encouragement for both genders. Different forms of addressing were used. Males were called by surname and females by name. These different forms of address signified that students in the classroom are not at the same social status. A contributor, not accorded attention and respect will find the capacity reduced for full participation in the social elaboration of thought, meaning, and community values. The cycle may reproduce itself even subtler ways (Eckert, P. and McConnell-Ginet, S. 1992).

The last section analyses teacher assessment. The results (3.4 males, 2. females) show a tendency to devalue the work of females. Females and males produced almost the same academic product but females failed to receive the same evaluation of work, because teachers presume less academic value of females. Lakoff (1975) points out that a woman using the same powerful language strategies as a man, might well be evaluated as more aggressive than the man. Conversely, language strategies that are heard as powerful when used by a man, may well not be heard as such when employed by a woman.

According to Eckert, McConnell-Ginet (1992) devaluation and limited authority tend to reproduce themselves. This must not be seen as "blaming the victim" for interactional failures but as showing how dominance can be exercised in the absence of overt coercion. Unfortunately this is the case of Albanian education. Teachers not only offer gender biased education, but they are not aware of it in the process of teaching. This helps to maintain male dominance.

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to highlight gender biased issues in classroom interaction. Classroom experiences appear to have effects on students' attitudes. For both males and females, the impact of any particular experience seemed to depend on the subjective meaning the student attached to the experience. School experiences are fundamental in shaping the perceptions of the student for the rest of the life. These results suggest that the brightest females are not being nurtured to the same extent as are boys in the classroom. This kind of educational encouragement facilitates males' achievement while having little positive effect on females' achievement. If the females are treated in a different manner than the males, their self-esteem will be harmed and they will lower their expectancies. It is the teachers role and responsibility to question deeply rooted sexist attitudes and help students understand that gender biased environment has harmful personal and social effects and consequences. Teachers should be aware of their own attitudes and behaviors about gender roles. Education should not advise students how to behave, but it should promote equal opportunities for both males and females. Teachers should keep a gender neutral position and make sure to give the same level and quality of interaction to each student regardless of his/her gender.

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