Boys' and Girls' Gendered Voices in EFL Debates

Discursos de género entre jóvenes durante debates en el contexto de la enseñanza de inglés como lengua extranjera

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This article reports a case study conducted at a school in Bogotá. It was based on constructivist and poststructuralist frameworks that viewed gender positioning as a social construction in foreign language learning contexts (Baxter, 2003; Sunderland, 1992; Tannen, 1996). Aiming to understand how ninth grade gender positioning is constructed, and how gendered discourses emerge in EFL debates, we carried out interviews and observations and analyzed those issues following feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (FPDA) principles (Baxter, 2008). Findings suggest that learners view themselves as both masculine and feminine, using their interests and behaviors as the principal means of defining their gender positioning discursively in debates in another language (L2).

Key words: Debates, EFL, gender positioning, gendered discourses, L2

Este artículo reporta un estudio de caso realizado en un colegio de Bogotá bajo las perspectivas post-estructuralista y constructivista sobre el posicionamiento de género como una construcción social en contextos de aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera (Baxter, 2003; Sunderland, 1992; Tannen, 1996). Con el objetivo de comprender cómo los estudiantes de noveno grado construyen su posicionamiento de género y cómo los discursos de género emergen a través de los debates en el aula, se llevaron a cabo entrevistas y observaciones analizadas a través del enfoque feminista post-estructuralista (FPDA por sus siglas en inglés). Los resultados sugieren que los estudiantes se ven así mismos tanto masculinos como femeninos, haciendo uso de sus intereses y comportamientos como el medio principal para definir su posicionamiento de género discursivamente durante los debates en otra lengua (L2).

Palabras clave: debates, discursos de género, L2, posicionamiento de género

Introduction

Moving away from positivistic understandings of gender in isolation, we initiated this study to espouse constructivist and poststructuralist perspectives on gender and language learning to gain understanding about how ninth graders' gender positioning is constructed and how gendered discourses emerge. The implementation of debates that focused on controversial issues was the means to look into the interaction among boys and girls. As teachers, we encouraged pupils to examine a variety of viewpoints, to find areas of agreement and to experience the real world with the safety net of a supportive environment in which they could construct gender identities by taking certain positions, defending them, or altering them.

Literature Review

This review of the literature takes a holistic approach to the examination of gender positioning in the field of gender and language studies by looking at various aspects of identity construction, and its relationship to male and female discourses, learner-learner interaction and EFL language learning from a feminist poststructuralist view.

Gender and Language: Shifting Paradigms

In the field of Gender and its relation with language pioneer studies, the focus is on three major theories: deficit theory, the dominance framework, and the difference framework. The deficit theory reflects Lakoff's (1975) work on language and women's speech. These studies emphasized the perceived negative aspects of women's speech in contrast to the perceived normative language of men.

In the mid-1970s, researchers adopted a dominance framework and began linking negative evaluations of women's language to their social domination by men (Bergvall, 1999). Studies of gendered language structures and language use (Coates & Cameron, 1988; Philips, 1980; Philips, Steele, & Tanz, 1987; Tannen, 1996; Thorne, Kramarae, & Henley, 1983) suggested that men gain and maintain power over women in social interaction by interrupting and overlapping women's speech, using a high volume of words, or by denigrating women. Research and activism in this area led to widespread adoption of guidelines for nonsexist English language usage (Cooper, 1989; Nichols, 1999).

In the early 1980s, the difference framework, also known as the dual-culture model, emerged as an alternative to the dominance model. The difference framework suggests that girls and boys are socialized into different ways of relating to one another in their predominantly same-sex interactions and, thus, acquire different communicative styles.

According to this model, if communication breaks down between men and women, it's a matter of misinterpreting the other's form of interaction (Tannen, 1993, 1996). In the mid to late 1980s, the difference model had come to include a celebrating-difference component that valued the positive aspects of women's unique communicative styles.

However, researchers adopting constructivist and feminist poststructuralist paradigms focusing on the relationship between gender and language in L2 learning contexts have moved beyond the traditional focus on gender differences and gender as an individual and generalizable trait to viewing gender as a social construction within specific cultural and situational contexts (Pavlenko, 2004; Sunderland, Cowley, Rahim, Leontzakou, & Shattuck, 2002).

The differences a boy and a girl have in the classroom are the result of the personalities they have, as well as the context and the atmosphere they are in at certain times. On the foundation of the FPDA approach, generalizing about being "male" or "female" it is not significant since this generalization intensifies differences between men's and women's social power. However, FPDA does not see females as the ones who suffer because of male dominance in our society, and does not see males as villains, to consider the plurality or diversity of their biological sex (Baxter, 2008).

The existence of a debate has been recognized about whether or not gender is an important factor in deciding which speakers are potentially to be considered "effective." Authors linked with the previous discussion informed our line of research inquiry (Baxter, 2008; Castañeda-Peña, 2009; Sunderland et al., 2002; Walkerdine, 1990).

In Castañeda-Peña's (2009) research, the use of FPDA helped to observe easily the competing discourses in which preschoolers were positioned during EFL activities. He describes that FPDA can be significant to understand the very moment in which subject positions are constituted and shifted in the multilingual societies where children confront competing gendered discourses.

Walkerdine (1990) has ably illustrated this in her analysis of a stretch of spoken discourse in the classroom, in which two kindergarten boys taunt a young female teacher. In this case, the female teacher held two positions: the powerful position as a teacher, a role that represents a superior status over students, but also a powerless position as a woman who is not able to resist learners' sexist constructions of her.

It is a fact that findings of different studies in the field of gender and language such as the abovementioned one reflect the need to draw on feminist and poststructuralist principles aiming to examine gender complexities and ambiguities within classroom interaction. For this reason, this classroom study is inspired by the concerns in foreign language education about the successful English performance of pupils in relation to

gender and the view of gender differentiation, from the FPDA parading as a meaningful discourse in terms of understanding the practices of any group of speakers.

Since gender identity has involved frameworks for investigating how women and men (femininity and masculinity) work in educational contexts, EFL teachers need to be aware of the impact gendered language and behaviors might have on the development of pupils' EFL skills and act accordingly.

In this study, we define gender as a complex system of social relations and discursive practices, differentially constructed in local contexts. This approach, situated within a poststructuralist framework, foregrounds socio-historic, cross-cultural, and cross-linguistic differences in constructing gender.

We recognize that gender, as one of many important facets of social identity, interacts with race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, age, and social status in framing students' language learning experiences, trajectories, and outcomes. Thus gender does not refer to sexual differences but to a set of socially-defined roles and identity which people come to develop in the process of socialization involving power relations.

Positioning as a Means of Gender Identity Construction

Positioning theory. The term positioning was first used by Hollway (1984) and referred to the subjectivities women and men are involved in as "the product of their history of positioning in discourses" (p. 228). Since then, the positioning theory has been described as "an analytic tool that can be used flexibly to describe the shifting multiple relations in a community of practice" (Linehan & McCarthy, 2000, p. 441).

According to Davies and Harré (1990), positioning is defined as the discursive process whereby people are located in conversations as observable and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines.

Through conversational interactions people use "storylines" to validate their words and actions to themselves and others. These storylines "can be taken from a cultural repertoire or can be invented" (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p. 30). When conversations evolve, discursive practices positions are subject to change because of storylines and participants' roles. In a classroom, participants should not be positioned in the same role from the beginning to the end; rather, they should be allowed to be in different kinds of roles during the conversation thus complicating the nature of interpersonal relationships during group work (Yamakawa, Forman, & Ansell, 2005). One can be positioned by another or by oneself, interactive or reflective positioning, respectively (Davies & Harré, 1990). This definition means that participants position themselves or are positioned in different conversational locations. Thus, for this study

positioning is the conceptualization of students' discourses that can be negotiated and changed during classroom interactions.

In those teacher-learner and learner-learner interactions (Sunderland, 1992), power relationships that can be reinforced or denied by peers' and teachers' approval are also negotiated (Baxter, 2003). For instance, when a teacher positions a student over another from an academic or disciplinary viewpoint as the best student or as the most undisciplined one, their classmates could position him/her in different ways as the class toad or just simply as the nicest person or clown in the class, but also, he/she could positioned himself/herself as collaborator or as the funniest person in the class; this is an example of how individuals can be positioned as powerless or powerful depending upon which discursive practices they enter as subject (Walkerdine, 1998).

Within classroom socializations students start to construct their gender identity as masculine and feminine, but since gender identity is self-meaning (Burke, Stets, & Pirog-Good, 1988), it cannot be directly observed but must be inferred from behaviors and expressions in which people engage.

Burke et al. (1988, p. 1) explained that Gender identity is as a matter of the societal members who "decide what being male or female means (e.g., dominant or passive, brave or emotional), and males will generally respond by defining themselves as masculine while females will generally define themselves as feminine, however, it is possible for one to be female and see herself as masculine or male and see himself as feminine."

The term gender identity is the same as referring to masculinity and femininity (Burke et al., 1988). "Femininity and masculinity are rooted in the social (one's gender) rather than the biological (one's sex)" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 1); for instance, if we observe a male making up his face or a female doing hard work, some people could stereotype them as gay or as a tomboy. However, those behaviors do not have any relationship with their biological sex or sexual preferences, but it is the way in which he express his femininity and she her masculinity.

Therefore, "a person may label herself female, but instead of seeing herself in a stereotypical female manner such as being expressive, warm, and submissive" (Ashmore, Del Boca, & Arthur as cited in Burke et al., 2000, p. 2), she may view herself in a somewhat stereotypically masculine fashion such as being somewhat instrumental, rational, and dominant. The point is that people have views of themselves along a feminine-masculine dimension of meaning, some being more feminine, some more masculine, and some perhaps a mixture of the two. "It is this meaning along the feminine-masculine dimension that is their gender identity, and it is this that guides their behavior" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 2).

Method

The authors conducted a qualitative descriptive case study in terms of Gillham's definition (2000, p. 1): "A unit of human activity embedded in the real world; which can only be studied or understood in context; which exists in the here and now; that merges in with its context so that precise boundaries are difficult to draw." This approach permitted us to identify and describe gendered discourses and behaviours in the context in which they were produced.

Setting and Participants

The implementation of controversial issues debates took place at a school located in Bogota. The target population was 40 ninth graders from 14 to 17 years old. Since our study concerns gender and we did not have access to all students, we determined that our participants would be two females (FS1=female student 1/ FS2=female student 2) and two males (MS1=male student 1/ MS2=male student 2). In order to select the participants, we adopted the typical case sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) because participants exhibited certain characteristics from the whole population. Analyzing the quality and quantity of their interventions, focal students showed active participation and expressed their opinions using some foreign language expressions when interacting.

In order to develop the debates, we planned ten lessons focused on debates. In the first class students selected the topics, then, we divided the lessons into 3 sections. We developed 3 classes per section. The first two classes focused on certain pre-debate activities such as watching a video or listening to a song, in which ninth graders practiced new vocabulary and useful expressions in order to participate in the third class defending their positions during a debate for 45 minutes. Subsequently, we carried out all lessons this way.

Data Analysis

The events of gender positioning analyzed in this article were taken from the ninth graders' videotaped debate segments of classroom observations and interview. By analyzing the observations, we were able to produce a "thick description" of learners' interaction within the discussion activities (Geertz, 1973, p. 6). During learner-learner interactions, one of the teacher-researchers sat next to them, and took notes.

On the other hand, during the individual interviews learners were given hypothetical situations such as: "One of your little cousins is alone in the house surfing on the net; you realize that he/she is looking at the porn sites"[1] (see Appendix). In this way, we collected data

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1   The original hypothetical situations were conveyed in Spanish.

about how, by gender, the personal stories and experiences of participants influence the position taken on various issues (Kvale, 1996).

A thematic analysis of the data was developed (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). To different segments of data, we assigned one or more thematic codes such as "gender equality," "male and female roles," and "stereotypes". Following the principles of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we grouped thematic codes according to the patterns we found among them. From this analysis emerged the categories that lead us to understand how ninth grade students' gender positioning is constructed and how gendered discourses emerge in L2 debates.

In order to analyze the categories, we employed feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (FPDA) that includes a micro-analytic descriptive level (denotative) and an interpretative level (connotative) (Baxter, 2003).

The categories analyzed were "Pink and Blue Talk!" and "Best Known As." Through these categories we aimed to interpret gendered discursive productions of students' selves in controversial debates, since understanding of gender positioning involves the analysis of discursive practices (Davies & Harré, 1990).

Pink and Blue Talk!

As we analyzed the patterns throughout the data, we were struck by the prevalence of what we began to see as "gendered discourses." During the observations and interviews participants expressed their ideas reflecting their positive and negative perceptions about men and women.[2] We found that gender positioning was shown on the part of interactions, but that other kinds of social positioning were not constant in comparison with the interviews. That means, interviewees were more inclined to use gender identity categories, such as "mentirosos" (liars) (53) referring to men, or "maternales" (maternal) (110) referring to women (Wortham, 2006), than they were to apply social categories such as "pobre" or "negro" (poor or black people).

Hence, "Pink and Blue Talk!" refers to gender differences among students through their gendered language discourses, in which "Pink Talk" is understood as learners, both girls or boys' positive or negative perceptions towards females and, "Blue Talk" as learners, both girls' or boys' positive or negative perceptions towards males.

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2   Excerpts taken from interviews and observations were highlighted according to students' gendered perceptions. Positive and negative comments towards female learners were stressed in **bold text,** and positive and negative comments towards male pupils were underlined.

Microanalysis (denotative level). Through the description of the debaters' discourses (discourse in the sense of "ways of seeing the world") we analyzed how gendered positions were communicated in L2 learning.

Excerpt 1

Context: FT1 Teacher showed class a video about a British series called Skins that deals with a variety of teenage issues, then students answered some questions related to characters' lives, Ss were working by groups, there were five.

FT: Female Teacher, MT: Male

52. FT1→ Ss G5:[3] Do you think that people's attitudes and behaviors are related to his/her gender?[4]

53. FS1→ Ss: <u>men are irresponsible</u>, it depends on what they are interested in, and they use many lies to please someone.
(Observation)

This extract illustrates how FS1 stressed her negative perception towards a male character on the video. In the following excerpt, obtained from the interviews, we could identify other perceptions.

Excerpt 2

Context: Interviews were developed outside the classroom. MT2 was the interviewer and FT3 was videotaping. Q1=Question

101. MT2→ MS1: Q3. During English classes, who do you think outperform more, girls or boys? Why?

102. MS1 → MT2: **Girls, I think that girls, because they are more interested** to English than boys, <u>men don't show much interest to the language as girls do</u>.

109. MT2 → FS2: Q10. A friend recommends you an English course that he/she is currently taking. He/ she asks you that if you'd have the opportunity to choose between a male or female teacher, who would you prefer to take the classes a female or a male teacher? What would you do?

110. FS2 → MT2: I think that I'd prefer a male teacher, because they are more directed to the point than female teachers; however **female teachers are more maternal and less directed than male teacher.**
(Interview)

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3   G5: group number 5; Ss: students
4   The original questions were conveyed in Spanish.

This sequence shows how MS1 stated that it is easier for women to learn English than for men, because they are more willing and disciplined to study English than men (102). On the contrary, FS2 in this case supported her opinion about her own gender when she said that female teachers are more motherly (110).

FPDA commentary (connotative level). The pupils' comments above indicate the relation between discourse and gender. According to Sunderland et al. (2002), gender becomes something that is 'done' in context, rather than be viewed as a fixed attribute. It means that Gender is a construction produced in discourse, but also takes into account how those discourses started to reflect differences between male and female gender positioning during debates.

Differences between male and female gender positioning found in excerpts 1 and 2 occur because, as Law and Chan (2004) state, people's internalized stereotypical differences such as males as liars and irresponsible (Excerpt 1, 53) or girls as willing, disciplined, acting out of self-interest or as motherly (Excerpt 2, 102, 108, 110), are formed by different socialization agents (e.g., schools) and processes. Nevertheless, it is in those socializations where behaviors and words start to define women and men according to certain social norms (Sunderland et al., 2002).

Furthermore, through discourses or storylines (Davies & Harré, 1990) within conversational interactions, participants were able to reflect on those particular roles and instances culturally coded as "gendered" (Cameron & Kulick as cited in Holmes & Marra, 2010, p. 6) as well as reflect on how through those storylines they made their words and actions meaningful to themselves and others (Davies & Harré, 1990).

Finally, people "perform" or project different selves through the selection of diverse discourses: This is called "self-positioning" (Sunderland, 2004, p. 102). The data indicated that gendered discourses, embedded and/or reflected in the social practices of L2 learners, informed them with gendered categories that differentiated them.

Best Known As: Positions in EFL Classroom

As a result of the analysis of debate interactions, it was possible to identify four ways in which they were positioned most of the time: *manager*, *expert*, *humorist*, and *helper*. Therefore, we named this category "Best Known As" because boys and girls were identified in certain positions by themselves and their classmates according to their roles in their social network. This identification concerns how L2 learners "position themselves and are positioned by others depending on where they are, who they are with, and what they are doing" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 3).

Microanalysis (denotative level). We concentrated on the discourse and interactional features, examining the sequential organization of talk, including turn-taking and explicit and implicit references to identity and difference.

Excerpt *5*

Context: Students watched a video and discussed it for 45 minutes some controversial statements related to topics such as sex, drugs, environmental awareness, human relationships, and so forth (e.g., if I consume drugs I can quit whenever I want).

MS1 carried out routine tasks when asked to do so by another group member. *He acted in a subordinate position, under the other person's direction.* (Helper)

FS1 Initiated work, invited ideas, interpreted instructions, gave orders or made suggestions about who should do what, or how to tackle the task. (Manager)
(Observation)

Excerpt 6

Context: MT2 was the interviewer and FT3 was videotaping.

115. MT2 → FS2: Q.6. One of your little cousins is alone in the house surfing on the net; you realize that he/she is looking at the porn sites. What would you do and what would be your reaction?

116. FS2 → MT2: **I would get angry and brave**, because he/she is a child, and those webpages aren't appropriate for he/she. I would say to him what's wrong and I'd try to talk with him/her.

117. FS2: **I saw in a program that there** are men and women who become addicted to pornography, then when they want to have sex the only way to get worked up is looking at porn sites, then suddenly he/she loses his/her sexual life. Later he/she will do that because he/she gets addicted to it.
(Interview)

By analyzing verbal and nonverbal young learner' discourses, we explored the relationship between their learning and identity-building in EFL debates. We explored their discourses and roles in discussions to illustrate how positioning could be used as a tool for interpreting male and female identity-building as learners of English.

In the next section will explain a range of ways in which participants (FS1/FS2/MS1/MS2) positioned themselves, or were positioned by others, during the discussion.

FPDA commentary (connotative level). Aspects of their identities, abilities, and interests were revealed in class participation. Information derived from interviews was related to the ways participants positioned themselves. As a result of the analysis, it was possible to identify a range of ways in which participants (FS1/FS2/MS1/MS2) positioned themselves, or were positioned by others, during the discussion.

Firstly, we have the FS1 who took up the position of manager when she called her peers' attention and suggested starting the discussion by saying something like "Let's get started" or simply "Okay?" Another way of taking a position as manager was to ask other members to

carry out certain tasks in some groups; the position of manager was taken up by various learners at different times, but in this case she always occupied this position during each episode of collaborative work, often because other members looked up to her as a leader.

In second place, the FS2 took a position of expert when she carried authority and influence in the discussions; she seemed in control of the rest. Members of a social network are not accepted as Experts unless they are respected by the other members and no one else is considered "more expert." For example, on some occasions FS2 easily took the position of Expert because all the others members looked to her for ideas and explanations.

In the case of boys, we observed that MS1 assumed a position of helper in tasks (to write, to look up in the dictionary, to ask the teacher, and supporting his classmates), he responded to others' questions or directions. He acted subordinately.

MS2 had the position of Humorist presenting contradictions. Humor can help the group when it is under pressure and generally make an English lesson more enjoyable, but too frequent humor may distract others and suggest that the Humorist may not be taking the task seriously. Thus, the MS2 seemed to distract the others but the extent of the negative impact depended on how the others responded. If they disregarded the "entertainer," or paid him only brief attention then returned immediately to the task, the impact seemed smaller, but if they joined in as audience they wasted working time.

We consider that any collaborative group would provide opportunities for people to be positioned as manager, helper, humorist, or expert. Not all of these will be occupied on every occasion, as we found, but the possibility exists. The availability of some positions may depend on contextual factors such as group composition, classroom social norms, or the nature of the task.

Conclusions

The feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis permitted us to understand how ninth grade gender positioning was constructed and how gendered discourses emerged in controversial EFL debates.

In terms of responses, our textual analysis indicated that gender positioning was ubiquitous. Participants positioned themselves according to their background and experiences. They assigned to the other gender certain social characteristics, such as the conceptions that FS1 had about the emotional strength of women in comparison with men (81), and the physical strength assigned to men as in the interview with FS2 when she said "de pronto en lo físico los hombres nos ganan, pero en lo emocional somos un poco más fuertes y de llevar las penas" (perhaps…men are physically stronger than we are, but we are a little bit emotionally stronger than they are for coping with sorrows) (112). Data suggest common

perceptions such as being a woman entailing weakness and emotion while being a man means entails action.

By analyzing verbal and nonverbal female and male discourses from the controversial debates observation and interview displayed on the extracts (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6), we found that (FS1/FS2/MS1/MS2) not only did students position themselves but also how they were positioned by other classmates with other kinds of positions while they were interacting. Thus, they were characterized as manager, expert humorist, and helper.

We conclude that, for a group to collaborate optimally, positioning should flow as smoothly as possible. Learners should be able to move freely in and out of the positions of, for example, expert, humorist, manager, collaborator or helper. We realize the importance of "flexibility in sharing metacognitive roles" (Goos, Galbraith, & Renshaw, 2002) rather than the exclusive occupancy of any position by one individual that may have negative consequences both collectively and individually.

Finally, male and female participants' storylines in conversational interactions about controversial topics or situations allowed us to understand how gendered discourses emerged in L2 while they shared, contrasted and built new perceptions among themselves. Learners viewed themselves as both masculine and feminine, using their interests and behaviors as the principal means of defining their gender positioning. In the debates, participants could express discourses and behaviors of approval and disapproval of their masculinity and femininity; however, students adopted fixed positions which reduced male learners' opportunities to construct their gender positioning discursively.

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Appendix: List of Hypothetical Situations[5]

1. There is a competition in the classroom: A group of girls and boys is missing a member and you are to be the person to complete the group. Which group would you like to belong to—the girls' group or the boys' group?

2. Someone posted a negative comment about you on Facebook. How would you respond or react to this comment?

3. Suppose that you have a younger sister aged 11. Looking for a pen in her room you find some birth control pills. What will you do? What will your reaction be?

4. One of your little cousins is alone in the house surfing on the net; you realize that he/she is looking at porn sites. What will you do? What will your reaction be?

5. During an English class debate, you want to participate, but your teacher does not give you the opportunity to do so. What will you do? What will your reaction be?

6. Your classmates are upset because you said that men are better at physical tasks that women. What will you do? What will your reaction be?

7. One of your classmates says that women are only interested in talking about clothes, boyfriends, and Facebook. What will you do? What will your reaction be?

8. A friend recommends an English course to you that he/she is currently taking. He/she asks that if you had the opportunity of choosing between a male or female teacher, which teacher would you prefer? What would you do?

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5   The hypothetical situation questions were originally conducted in Spanish.