

Chapter 22

Challenging Hegemonic Discourses of Gender: Emergence of The Third Space³²

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After facing so many unfair social situations throughout my life in the news and my immediate context, I started wondering about the roots of such social problems. With years of learning, I realized about the importance of exploring how power operates in society. I then focused my research on the traditional presence of power imbalances in the realm of gender and how heteronormativity permeates the learning of a foreign language (Castañeda-Peña, 2008).

In fact, “when we try to understand masculine domination, we must investigate the modes of thought which result from domination”. (Bourdieu, 2001, pp. 5) In other words, when we understand how language encloses a patriarchal discourse, we can also understand other forms of colonial domination and fight them from a de-colonial stance. Hence, the Third Space of gendered subjectivity emerges as an alternative to such domination.

This study was prompted by my seeing that some of my students assumed that men were generally the best in the class. When, during an intermediate English class, I showed the class an example of a well-written essay, one of the boys said, “He is a really good writer” and I said, “Yes, she is really good”. I thought it was only a mistake, until another boy repeated, “Yes, he is a good writer”. This reminded me of Butler’s concept of hegemonic gender performativity (1988), which generally attributes success to men.

To investigate these assumptions about gender conventions, I held situational interviews with two students chosen at random, who were asked what they

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thought about the above incident and another (described by Rondón, 2002), where a girl said she went out with her girlfriend, and teacher replied, “You don’t say girlfriend, you say boyfriend”. Both students thought that the assumption of the boys in my class and of the teacher in the second example were “normal” in our society. This shows how male domination seems to be embedded in the teaching of EFL in Colombia, both to children and adults.

Hence, I undertook a feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis (Baxter, 2003), since it enables one to study the use of power in a communicative situation (Markee, 2000) and reveals shifts and imbalances of power. I then did audio-recordings, each lasting about 45 minutes, of three conversations by nine students from an upper-intermediate English class and interpreted them with aspects of conversation analysis like turn-taking, *deixis* and speech acts, complemented by member-check interviews to better understand the data. I found that the students constructed alternative gendered subjectivities, which formed third spaces (Bhabha, 1994) that challenged the hegemonic power structure of the class. Even though some participants of the study seemed to reproduce hegemonic discourses of male domination, in which some ideas were seconded by men when they came from either a man or a woman supported what other men were saying, there were female students that resisted such unequal conditions in the classroom interaction. This study demonstrated how students can overcome the silencing that women have suffered throughout history (Bourdieu, 2001). But, how could it happen?

Domination Discourses through the hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity

Some students used power relations to make other students invisible. Some of the men and women (none said they belonged to the LGBTI community) were intolerant or disrespectful towards the opinions of some of their classmates.

One example was a conversation between two men, Gabriel and Javier, and a woman, Sofia, about the effects of video games on children’s development. Javier was a university professor, Gabriel a historian and Sofia was studying English. The two men empowered each other by saying things like “I second you”. Gabriel often echoed Javier’s opinions, while Javier would ask Gabriel what he thought about videogames for kids. By contrast, Javier ordered Sofia “to select one topic, OK? You have to write down some ideas”, showing a degree of discrimination.

In the interview Gabriel said that there had not been any gender issues during the conversation, which shows how gender inequality is normalized through language (Butler, 2004). Gabriel's claim and the way Sofia was ignored taught me how language can become a vicious form of oppression of those who are different. Gabriel also said that he had more respect for Javier, because of his age and profession, which are ways to make others invisible. My analysis of *deixis*, speech acts, the use of conjunctions and expressions and turn-taking showed how both men supported each other, while overlooking Sofia, a woman.

However, sexism is not only found in the discourses of men. According to Foucault (1982) power structures are also reproduced by different members of local social groups, women in this case. In the interview, Isabel, who showed leadership skills in the classes, said that knowledge was her way of positioning herself as a powerful woman. What, then, was the problem? Her alignment with other powerful students, like Gabriel and Javier, and indifference to Sofia's ideas showed a solidarity with hegemonic masculinities.

Isabel also said that she would prefer to be corrected by someone like Gabriel or Javier than someone like Sofia, because the two men had an in-depth knowledge of certain topics discussed in the class, while Sofia was only a college student. The same preference for men over women was also seen in the discussions of the smaller groups, where the priority is conversation and such shifts in power are more evident.

What light do the above incidents throw on gendered imbalances? They are examples of Bhabha's (1994) concept of mimicry: the imitation and adoption of the behavior and discourse of the dominant group. The men and women whose subjectivities rest on a discourse of male dominance believe it will make them more successful at learning English.

The idealized student and transitional gendered subjectivities

If the mainstream power structures are assimilated in the above ways, how does the Third Space challenge them? Some students believed that having a good command of English as well as specialized areas of knowledge would empower them. Among the women, Isabel and Sofia were examples of this.

Both women showed tendencies to embrace knowledge as a means of resistance towards the invisibilizing discourses of their male partners. In the case of Isabel, she transitioned from a knowledgeable, participative student that interacted with male students, to a student who challenged her counterparts. This happened in discussions in which she criticized opinions of her partners, she took longer turns and she was the one who summarized their partners' ideas at the end of discussions. This shows that we cannot judge individuals who go through subject positionings of heteronormativity. Instead, giving them opportunities to use knowledge, giving them a voice in class might position them in a more critical stance against sexist habits.

Regarding Sofia, a student that was invisibilized by both men and women who supported men, she was able to adopt positioning of teacher-like discourses. She tried to imitate the use of language of the one who has institutional power. By aligning to not only the types of interaction of teacher with students, but also with persistence, showing empathy with other people, Sofia was accepted in her group and her ideas were taken into account more often.

Thus, hegemonic alliances were not constant, since the discourse is constantly shifting in accordance with the interests and personalities of the subjects (Delgado 2019), as in the case of Isabel, who supported the men, but then showed more empathy towards Sofía, whom they had ignored. Hence, the Third Space is the transition from a woman who is invisible to one who is empowered by means of a hybrid identity in which she is free to accept or challenge different aspects of a discourse. Sofia, for example, who was originally discriminated against by some of her classmates, was silent to begin with and then took a full part in the classroom discussions.

Furthermore, gendered relations of power are co-constructed (Delgado, 2019) which means that women who are oppressed can fight back by showing solidarity with others of their gender (Tannen, 1990) and open a space for themselves in the classroom, since the linguistic means to achieve a male hegemony (excessive turn-taking, interruptions, overlapping) need not stop them from expressing their opinions in a foreign language.

What should we do as teachers?

Research into the role of gender in language classes gives us a chance to question the extent to which our teaching should be limited to instructions on how to master the language and inquire into the influence of unequal structures of power which ignore instances of social injustice. Making pedagogical methods the priority may fail to take the local contexts of EFL into account (teachingenglish.org.uk, 2018).

Hence, Rondón (2012) warns teachers not to reproduce the heteronormative approach which is embedded in many discourses. When we become more aware of how language is used to reinforce gender positioning and normalize patriarchal power, we can develop classroom activities which are more gender-balanced and in line with the specific needs of our contexts.

Apart from approaching gender from a decolonial perspective (Mendoza, 2016), we need to change heteronormative teaching practices. One way to do this would be to ask the powerful students in the class to help the powerless one. Another would be to make our students more aware of gender inequalities through the use of appropriate teaching materials that will encourage them to accept people's differences (Vandrick, 1994).

We can also use gender sensitivity as a criterion for designing materials appropriate to the level and background of our students. For example, if we talk about professions, we should reject the conventional belief that nurses are usually women and doctors are usually men.

What to do next? The Third Space and the Epistemologies of the South in Colombia

This chapter discussed how the Third Space is an alternative view of discourses of gender resistance in language teaching and learning. The Third Space is a concept which draws on aspects of postcoloniality, so that gender is not only discussed from a post-structuralist view (Baxter, 2003). Future studies of gender and the analysis of power structures in ELT contexts can explore the Third Space as a tool to understand how students and foreign language users in general shift through asymmetrical relations of power.

According to Delgado (2019, “The Third Space is a starting point for studies of social situations where oppression and domination operate through different means, like economics, religion, gender, race, ideology, age and other forms of social control”. (p. 150) The Third Space is often used to describe immigrant students (Bhabha, 1994). However, its discourse analysis can be used to understand different aspects of gender and language teaching and strengthen the epistemological foundations of decoloniality in Latin America.

I would like to go further into the manner in which hegemonic gender practices occur in the study and teaching of language. By understanding how gender imbalances operate in schools, teachers will be able to deal with these situations.

In short, gender is a factor of ELT which deserves further research in such areas as the link between gender and curriculum, the professional development of teachers and their representations of the self. As we move from describing to understanding these questions and no matter what the approach, such studies will improve the teaching of foreign languages in Latin America.

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