

Chapter 4

Genderlects in teaching and learning EFL¹⁰

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This is me!

Let me introduce myself. My name is Carolina Camacho, I earned a B.A. in Modern Languages (with a major in teaching) from the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (Colombia) in 2002. I also obtained a Master´s in Cultural Studies at the same university, which broadened my theoretical knowledge and professional experience. I have taught at different levels (from preschool to higher education) and I have noticed that a key factor in a student´s success or failure in his or her studies and life is a hidden curriculum on gender that normalizes our views of it. Since then, I have always taken it into account in my teaching. I was lucky to publish a book about gender in the Colombian Armed Forces, from the education of cadets to the professional development of Army officers and their personal lives, like when they get married or have children, for example.

10 This chapter draws on my undergraduate research study entitled “Descripción de las diferencias de género en la habilidad de escritura en Inglés como lengua extranjera en el grado 3-A de primaria del Liceo VAL” submitted as a graduation requirement for the B.Ed in Languages at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (Colombia) in 2001.

The connection with the subject of my research

My current awareness of gender would not have arisen if I had not started questioning its impact on my teaching and academic career during my internship at a personalized school in 2000, where I taught a third-grade group made up of 13 boys and 5 girls. While the latter were the minority, they were not dominated by the boys: in fact, they were the best academically and in the interactions in the classroom, they were tough with the guys. For me, it was interesting to see how they normalize girls Vs. boys' things, up to the point of labeling them unanimously, as well as the way they could succeed despite that environment.

Thus, I thought about how gender could influence language, and I came across a term that is not mentioned in ELT, but used in literary criticism and sociolinguistics: genderlects, which refers to the different way that women and men use language, and I read several studies about this, both in the speaker's mother tongue and a foreign language.

The first, by Blair (2000), discusses the male and female genderlects in a high school in Canada, including the way teenagers talk to each other, the topics of their conversations, and the respective tools they use in language classes.

The second, by Krupnick (1985), seeks to know "how gender affects the quality of teaching and learning at Harvard University", which concludes that the teacher's personality and years of experience had more impact than gender (identifying as male or female) in class dynamics, showing that this last component was one more within the subjectivity configuration, the basis for social interaction. These studies show that genderlect reflects how an individual states his or her place in and faces society and his or her view of it. Although it is not the only factor, gender does influence how a person interacts in a social context because it is part of the person's identity.

These findings should lead to more general conclusions about the need to strengthen students' self-esteem and self-assessment so that regardless of his or her gender, everyone feels that he or she has a voice and can participate in the classroom. This is the teacher's main task, which no matter what the circumstances, should foster a more equitable and enriching learning environment.

What I learned from this experience

That happened a long time ago, but as I advance in my profession, I increasingly see that gender is an important factor in learning; however, it is related to other aspects, as I explain below:

The first insight

The approach of MacMahon & Zhang (1995) to the role of gender in learning a second language is still valid. They broadened the concept of genderlect from a binary concept to a factor in inclusion. The authors analyzed another study, done in 1991, related to the interaction of native and non-native speakers, both in single-sex and mixed classes and employed variables, like linguistic competence (based on TOEFL examination), as the sociocultural component. It finds that gender is only one variable among others (culture, class, age, marital status) which together shape the student's subjectivity and determine how the subject interacts.

The fact that genderlects are decisive in the learning environment is highlighted, along with the processes of language social acquisition, as they are social identities constructed to have a distinctive trait. Therefore, to be more effective, teachers thus need to pay close attention to these variables and their impact on the teaching-learning process and take each person's styles and preferences into account.

The second insight

The studies of the difference between the way males and females use language have mainly focused on the spoken, not the written, word. They began in the 1960s, working on two lines: one dealing with sexism in language, the other analyzing the similarities and differences between men and women in the use of language in terms of structure, vocabulary, and phonology.

These approaches to genderlects have remained binary, treating them as subcultures to discover their patterns of discourse: for more than fifty years they have focused on the differences between male and female speech patterns, based on conversations and interviews. According to Hamdan (2011), however, "little research has been done to identify male-female writing

styles that are speech-oriented” (Hamdan, 2011: 56), that is, writing has been regarded as a representation of spoken language and few studies have tackled gender differences in writing.

Nevertheless, Hamdan mentions some studies of the role of gender in writing and finds that the more recent they are, the fewer the references to gender differences. One, by Poynton (1989), notes that women more frequently use intensifiers (so, very) and words of approximation (about, around). Another, by Judith A. Boser (1991), finds that women are more inclined to use writing to establish rapport and express themselves.

In the last decade, recent studies have pointed out three things: the first addresses the need to review the preconceptions that exist regarding the accuracy of writing; the second raises questions and hypotheses about the way technology and Artificial Intelligence can be used in the future to identify patterns; the third raises the scenario of recognizing that there may be more similarities than differences between women and men, the latter being interesting and decisive in the discussion and study of the subject.

In 2000, Linda Olsson analyzed letters of introduction (mainly written by native English speakers), and she found that “there were generally more spelling mistakes in letters written by women than in letters written by men” (Olsson, 2000 cited by Hamdan, 2011).

Argamon et al. (2003) developed a computer program that was able to determine if a book was written by a man or a woman. It discovered that women tend to use more pronouns, while men prefer “words that identify or determine nouns (a-the-that) and words that quantify them (one, two, more)” (Argamon et al, 2003 cited by Hamdan, 2011).

In 2007, Lina Gyllard analyzed English texts written by Swedish teenagers to determine if there were linguistic differences, and she found that girls tend to use more static verbs and boys, more dynamic verbs. However, there was no difference in their use of adjectives. Martin Nykvist (2008) reached a similar conclusion: there were more similarities than differences in the short stories written by women and men.

It may be that the current emphasis on inclusiveness is ignoring those differences, but we should ask ourselves whether we are forgetting about other influences, like ethnicity, culture, and gender identification.

Third insight

To start the discussion on the role of gender in ELT in Colombia, especially at an undergraduate level, I should point out that when I went over the different undergraduate, postgraduate, Master's, and Ph.D. theses done at the Gender Studies School of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in 2011, the only one specifically devoted to this subject was mine. It was also both interesting and unnerving to discover that my study was cited in a Master's thesis, done at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, about the local situation of gender in ELT: I never thought my paper would have had an impact on the work of someone else and I am grateful for it. That is the reason for doing research: to connect people with the same interests, so we can expand and enrich our investigations.

Subjects for future studies

Now, nearly 18 years later, I realize that the role of genderlects in ELT has largely been ignored as if researchers failed to understand that gender is a variable that should be considered in teaching. While studies of ELT have discussed such factors as the multiplicity of intelligence and technology, they seem to forget that the way we have been raised and what we have accepted as standard has a huge impact on every aspect of our lives, including language. We cannot continue to assume that culture and society have made women more skillful at language and men at mathematics and unconsciously internalize and accept ideas that reinforce differences and are indifferent to disadvantages, especially at a time when we expect people to have equal access to opportunities. For example, men lead in technology mostly because their participation in it is socially accepted, but nowadays almost 56% of the world's population are females. However, at the same time, there is a current trend that emphasizes soft skills rather than assertiveness, a culturally assigned trait to women and girls, so we must be careful to continue reproducing inequalities in a different form. Thus, it is necessary to devise new strategies to encourage men and women to acquire different skills, regardless of their gender and social labels, to make equality and equity premises become a reality.

Also, literary analysis has shown that genderlects not only influence the way we speak but also the way we write. In sociolinguistics, however, most studies focus on the gender difference in speech. Writing has traditionally

been more the domain of men (we should remember that women had few opportunities for education in the past, so a reduced number had the chance to write). We should encourage women and girls to show their talent at writing.

Nevertheless, the most important change would be to broaden how we express ourselves (whether we are heterosexual or queer) and move beyond the current analyses of genderlects in terms of a binary division between males and females. There is more to it than that.

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