LANGUAGE LEARNING AND COGNITION

Selected Papers from the Conference on Language and Cognition
Faculty of Languages and Linguistics
University of Malaya
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Faculty of Languages and Linguistics
University of Malaya
2000

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University of Malaya Press
Published by
University of Malaya Press
50603 Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia
www.um.edu.my/umpress

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Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Language Learning and cognition: selected papers from the
Conference on Language and Cognition Faculty of Language
and Linguistics, University Malaya 2000/chief editors Elaine Morais;
editors Azirah Hashim... [et al.].
ISBN 983-100-134-6
1. Language and languages—Study and teaching—Congresses.
   I. Morais, Elaine.
   II. Azirah Hashim.
407

Printed by
University of Malaya Press
50603 Kuala Lumpur
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GENDER IMBALANCE IN CLASSROOM DISCOURSE PRACTICES

Jariah Mohd Jan &
Khatijah Shamsuddin

Introduction

It is now well established that in mixed sex classrooms, male pupils receive more teacher attention than female pupils do. Brophy and Good (1970:73), for example, have observed that “boys have more interactions with the teacher than girls and appear to be generally more salient in the teacher’s perceptual field.” Stanworth (1981) and Spender (1982) have also noted an imbalance in this respect and Galton, Simon and Croll’s conclusion is in essence the same although their formulation is more tentative, i.e. “There does appear to be a slight tendency for ... boys to receive more contact than girls” (1980:66).

The present study reveals imbalances in teacher-pupil contact which, in broad terms, are compatible with these observations. However, rather than simply reporting the occurrence of the imbalances and thereby giving yet more voice to an already well documented trend, it takes the gender-differentiated distribution of teacher attention as a starting point for further analysis and investigates its grounds. As Spender (1982:54) points out, “While it has been known for a long time that boys get so much more attention from teachers than do girls...few attempts have been made to explain this phenomenon.” The principal aim of this study is to provide the basis for such an explanation through an examination of classroom interaction.

Methodology

Description of Sample

The sample used for this study comprises 28 pupils of which 13 are girls and the rest are boys (15). The pupils are six year-old preschoolers from the Children Educational Centre of University Malaya or Tadika
Universiti Malaya (TADIKUM), a kindergarten which was initially set up for research purposes by the Faculty of Education, University of Malaya. Today, the kindergarten is open to all children of university staff including children of expatriate staff.

The medium of instruction in Tadikum is English and it follows the syllabus set by the Ministry of Education for all kindergartens in the country. The pupils are taught by experienced teachers who are trained in the Montessori system.

**Instrument**
The instruments used in this study include a questionnaire, interview sessions for both teacher and pupils, classroom observations, and video and audio recording.

**Procedure**
Teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil interactions of the various group compositions, i.e., single sex and mixed sex groups with a male and a female majority respectively, were observed. The pupils were observed for a total of 10 hours over a period of five days. The tasks or activities over the five days varied from colouring to reading comprehension.

**The Data**
The data to be considered comprise a classroom interaction between a female teacher and 28 preschool children (13 girls and 15 boys). The children were asked to identify and describe four places that they liked to visit. The four places that they identified were the seaside, the playground, the zoo, and the park.

**Analysis**
**Distribution of interaction turns between boys and girls**
The researchers began the analysis with a numerical breakdown of the interaction turns that occurred during the lesson.
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Table 1: Frequency of Turns in Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>NO. OF STUDENTS (N = 28)</th>
<th>NO. OF TURNS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BOYS</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GIRLS</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 indicates that when taken as categories, “boys” took more turns than “girls” did, that is 64 instances of turn-taking are clearly attributable to boys as against only 13 to girls. When one considers that boys are the majority (64:51) in the class, the proportion of the imbalance becomes all the more apparent.

Although a few studies have tried to directly account for distributions of this type, it is only now that statements are emerging from feminist research that shed some light on the patterns observed. These statements tend to be of two types. The first concerns teachers’ attitudes. Clarricoates (1978) and Stanworth (1981) claim that teachers have a general and overall preference for male pupils. Since it is the responsibility of the teacher to allocate turns to pupils in teacher-pupil classroom discussions, it is likely that the teacher’s preference for interacting with boys might give rise to the sort of pattern represented in Table 1. On the basis of such an analysis, the responsibility for gender imbalances rests largely with the teacher. Gender imbalances may then be seen to result from the teacher being socially, cognitively, and psychologically predisposed to eliciting contributions to the lesson from boys (by, for example, directing questions to them) at the expense of girls.

The second type of statement that feminist researchers have advanced that may be relevant to the interpretation of the present turn distribution deals more directly with interactional categories. The claims that boys are more likely than girls to, for example, ask questions, to “volunteer” information and to make heavier demands on the teacher’s time (Stanworth 1981) are considered. There is a very promising basis for explaining gender differentiation rates of pupils’ classroom participation in these proposals. However, it is clear that if one is to gain an adequate understanding of gender differentiated patterns, these notions must be qualified, clarified and refined in various respects. It is this task that we see ourselves as addressing in the sections of the analysis.
The articles in this volume are the result of specific investigations into the complex links between language learning and cognition. Most of the data is drawn from English with one article each on Japanese and Mandarin. The articles discuss the cognitive development of students in relation to reading and writing skills, vocabulary and grammar and the role of metacognition in this process. In addition, there are two articles that explore collaborative online learning and gender imbalance in classroom discourse practices.

The interface between language learning and cognition is not only worth investigating in its own right, it has also been the focus of educational reform in Malaysia and in other parts of the world. There is a renewed emphasis now on thinking skills and communication with the growing realization that both are crucial for the successful mastery of language itself and of all academic subjects. Students need to be able to think and to use language in order to think.

Each of the articles in this volume is an attempt to investigate that mysterious link between language learning and cognition in a specific context. It is hoped that the insights offered will stimulate research in this most fascinating area.

There is a companion volume *Issues in Language and Cognition.*