

RESEARCH ISSUES

The *TESOL Quarterly* publishes brief commentaries on aspects of qualitative and quantitative research. For this issue, we asked two researchers to discuss the topic of gender in research on language.

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Gender in Research on Language

Researching Gender-Related Patterns in Classroom Discourse

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■ TESOL classroom researchers have shown increasing interest in examining gender-related patterns of behavior in their work. This interest draws on and contributes to a burgeoning literature on gender and language. It is important, however, to bear in mind that gender-related patterns dovetail with all the other dynamics of language behavior: Ethnic, class, regional, and age differences all affect speaking styles, along with such influences as sexual orientation, professional training, and individual personality. In designing a study of gender and language, it is tempting to isolate specific linguistic strategies or features, such as interruption, tag questions, indirect speech acts, amount of talk produced, and then audiotape classroom discourse and count up occurrences of those features in the speech of females or males. Conclusions about the “meaning” of these patterns often seem to follow almost self-evidently. But there are many reasons for which such an approach is not nuanced enough to capture the dynamics underlying gender-related or any other linguistic patterns.

First, a linguistic feature that can be used for one purpose can also be used for another, even opposite, purpose. I will illustrate with a linguistic strategy that is particularly relevant to the TESOL class, in which students are likely to have very different cultural backgrounds and consequently very different assumptions and habits with respect to its use, that is, *overlap*—more than one voice going at the same time. I prefer the term *overlap* to the more commonly used term, *interruption*, because *interruption* is interpretive: It implies that a second speaker is violating the conversational rights of the first, and assumptions about

the second speaker’s intentions seem to follow logically from that. (He is trying to dominate, and so on). In some cases this is exactly what is occurring, but in many cases it is not. For example, a second speaker may talk along with a first in order to show enthusiastic listenership. Ironically, although many researchers have found that men tend to interrupt women more than women interrupt men, James and Clarke (1993), surveying studies of interruption and gender, note that researchers who compared all-female to all-male conversations found a higher rate of interruption in the all-female conversations. However, these interruptions were typically supportive in nature, reinforcing the point made by the original speaker rather than wresting the floor.

This brings us to further cautions that must be kept in mind whenever language is observed in interaction: One must take into account (a) the context in which a linguistic strategy is used, (b) the conversational styles of the participants, and (c) the interaction of those styles. Furthermore, intentions and effects are not necessarily the same. For example, regardless of the speaker’s intentions, the effect of an overlap can be obstructive when used with a speaker who believes only one voice should be heard at a time—and consequently feels compelled to yield the floor—but constructive when used with a speaker who feels that two voices going at once is the sign of a lively, involved conversation—and consequently feels free to continue speaking over the overlap.

The interruption/overlap example also illustrates the danger of assuming that a linguistic feature is accomplishing only one interactional goal, such as power or dominance (or, if the strategy under consideration is, for example, indirectness, then the opposing motives of solidarity or powerlessness). As I have argued and illustrated at length (Tannen, 1994), power and solidarity (or status and connection) are not mutually exclusive but rather intertwining and dovetailing: Every interchange must balance both. Thus, speaking along with another can serve both power and solidarity at the same time. There are speakers for whom a lively conversation entails a vigorous and invigorating competition for the floor, resulting in a mutually balanced shouting match that leaves both energized and satisfied.

Because of the dangers inherent in focusing too narrowly on one aspect of speech behavior, it is fruitful to view gender-related patterns from what Bateson (1979) calls *the corner of the eye*. One begins not by looking directly at features associated with gender but rather by looking at other dynamics of interaction and then looking to see how women and men tend to fall within the pattern. The theoretical approach I have found most enlightening to achieve that end is *framing* (Bateson, 1972; Goffman, 1974; Tannen, 1993).

A study that is exemplary in this regard was conducted by Kuhn (1992) on the classroom discourse of professors at U.S. and German universities. She found the language used by the U.S. women professors she taped initially puzzling: They were more assertive than their male colleagues in giving students direct orders at the beginning of the term. But a deeper analysis of the framing underlying these linguistic choices—that is, the alignment the speakers were taking up to the information conveyed and the students to whom they were conveying it—led Kuhn to observe that the women professors spoke of “the requirements” of the course as if these were handed down directly from the institution. This framing is what led them to tell students, without hedging, how they could fulfill the requirements. For example, one said, “We are going to talk about the requirements” (p. 319). Kuhn contrasts this with the men professors in her study who framed the requirements as decisions they personally had made. For example, one said, “I have two midterms and a final. And I added this first midterm rather early to get you going on reading, uh, discussions, so that you will not fall behind” (p. 323). In other words, the significant distinction in the classroom discourse of the women and men professors in Kuhn’s study resided not in the linguistic form of their discourse, but rather in the way the women and men positioned themselves with respect to the requirements and the students. The linguistic forms they chose can only be understood in light of that framing.

Interest in gender-related patterns of classroom discourse will enrich an understanding of the dynamics of the TESOL classroom. Drawing on the rich theoretical foundation of frames theory will ensure that research into the dynamic of gender will reflect the complex nature of linguistic behavior.

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Research as Gendered Practice

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■ Gender is one of the major social relations continually negotiated as we engage in social practices. It is a complex and contradictory system that operates not only on language practices and identities of learners and teachers but also on the practices and identities of researchers—the questions we ask, the methods we use, the interpretations we make of our data, the implications we draw from our research, the controversies we choose to argue and even the identities we construct in the process of conducting our research. I would like to pose a few provocative questions to highlight the tensions that must be managed in the gendered practice of research.

If gender is so ubiquitous, why has the TESOL profession taken so long to examine gender? Is it that without adequate theorizing of gender and second language, we do not notice the invisible relations being negotiated as we engage in research? Or is it that TESOL theorists are merely interested in other topics, having conceptualized language use and language learning as primarily cognitive processes rather than social processes, as argued by Rodby (1992)? Do some researchers avoid topics such as gender, race, ethnicity, and class in order to stay out of identity politics? If so, how does this avoidance affect theoretical development of the social processes of language use and language learning? Whose stories are being told in our research, how are these stories essentialized (made to seem as if they were universal stories), and who reads the stories we tell? What relations are being constructed when a male researcher tells the stories of female teachers or language learners or when a feminist researcher tells the story of learners or teachers whose gender ideologies differ from those of the researcher? To view research as gendered practice is to become