

Leslie Eble

The Defense Language Institute at Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas

Classroom Talk: How Men and Women Use Language Differently

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(classroom talk, gender, teacher attitudes)

Classroom talk is an important vehicle for learning. It enables students to convey their ideas to others and to explore, clarify and assimilate new ideas. Talking also allows one to sort through ideas, and gives rapid and extensive practice in handling them (Marland, 1977, cited in Graddol & Swann, 1989). Clearly, classroom participation is an important part of a student's academic growth and success. Yet many studies of classroom interaction have shown that males control classroom talk more than females. From primary school to the post-graduate classroom, men talk more, they exert more control over talk, and they interrupt more (Zimmerman & West, 1975, cited in Poynton, 1989). Women listen more and are more supportive when they do (Hirschman, 1973, 1974, cited in Poynton, 1989). Explanations of such discrepancies indicate that this imbalance is due to the following factors: differential language learning experiences of males and females, and teachers' attitudes, styles, and gender.

Robin Lakoff and Deborah Tannen strongly agree that English is spoken differently by men and women. They believe that each sex learns special styles of speech through socialization (Eakins & Eakins, 1978; Tannen, 1990). This belief is supported by the research of various sociologists, anthropologists and sociolinguists, which shows that boys and girls learn to use language differently in their sex-separate peer groups (Tannen, 1992). Girls, says Tannen, tend to spend most of their time playing and talking with a best friend or a small group of friends. They use language primarily as a way of establishing rapport and negotiating friendships. Emphasis is placed on matching similar experiences without trying to appear better than others. Boys, on the other hand, tend to play in larger groups that are hierarchical. For them, language is used to maintain status in this social order by challenging and resisting challenges, exhibiting knowledge and skill, and by holding center stage; trying to be the best.

It is this notion of males learning a competitive style in conversation and females a cooperative style that is at the heart of male domination in the classroom (Coates, 1986, cited in Kelly, 1991). Men speak more than women in class because the classroom setting is more conducive to men's language experience. It requires that students put themselves forward in front of a large group of people and open themselves up to challenge; an experience unfamiliar to most women (Tannen, 1991). Women are much more comfortable speaking in private to a small group of people they know well. Unlike men, they lack experience in defending

themselves against challenges and feel vulnerable when making comments in what they consider an unsupportive and noncollaborative classroom (Kramarae & Treichler, 1990).

Another reason men often speak more than women in the classroom is because they hold different attitudes toward speaking. "For most men, talk is primarily a means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order. This is done by exhibiting knowledge and skill, and by holding center stage through verbal performance" (Tannen, 1990, p.77). Since men value the position of being center stage and the feeling of knowing more, they actively seek opportunities where they can disseminate their knowledge. Classroom discussion offers such an opportunity. Women, on the other hand, monitor their participation not only to get the floor but also to avoid getting it (Tannen, 1992). According to Tannen, women who have spoken up once or twice will hold back for the rest of the class because they do not want to appear as though they are trying to dominate the discussion. Women are more inclined to play down their knowledge rather than display it to avoid trying to look like they are better.

Unlike women, men not only compete for the floor, but they have various strategies for holding on to it too. Drass (1986, cited in Simkins-Bullock & Wildman, 1991) ascertains that one way men do this is by interrupting women while they are speaking. Most women attest to the fact that they often feel cut off by men in conversation (Tannen, 1990). Part of the problem is that women frequently use questions to help maintain the conversation, and men seize these opportunities to dismiss what was being said in order to regain their turn (Coates, 1986, cited in Kelly, 1991). Coates asserts that men can also ignore what has been said by others and use their turn to make their own point. Women, who acknowledge the contribution of the previous speaker in a cooperative way, become resentful of this behavior and are discouraged when their own comments have been ignored (Kelly, 1991). At this point, many choose to opt out of the discussion completely.

The classroom is a different environment for those students who feel comfortable just jumping in and participating than it is for those who shy back and wait to be called on. Sadker & Sadker (1985) contend that as early as primary school, teachers pave the way for males to control classroom talk. Boys are allowed to call out answers without raising their hands. When girls call out, however, they are reprimanded and told not to shout out answers without raising their hands. In a study of over 100 classes Sadker & Sadker (1985) found that boys spoke on average three times as much as girls and were eight times more likely than girls to call out answers. This strategy not only enables boys to gain more than their fair share of classroom talk, but it also undermines girls' intellectual and academic abilities (Mahony, 1985, cited in Kelly, 1991). As a result, girls deliberately avoid participating in discussions (Swann & Graddol, 1989).

As we have just witnessed, classroom talk focuses on the role of the teacher as much as it does on the students. Teachers' attitudes and different teaching styles make classrooms very different places and hospitable to different students. Again we are faced with the grim reality that many classrooms are more hospitable to most men than to most women (Tannen, 1992).

Many teachers in the American educational system have adopted debate-like formats as the primary learning tool in their classrooms. Ritual opposition – public display followed by argument and challenge – is central to this type of format (Tannen, 1992). Teachers who follow this format feel that this is the best way to approach discussions because it sharpens the students' minds and helps them develop debating skills. They feel it teaches students how to take a side and defend it (Kramarae & Treichler, 1990). Most men, in fact, value the experience of being attacked and challenged publicly. It gives them the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge. Ritual opposition, however, is antithetical to the way females learn and like to interact (Tannen, 1992). They avoid being challenged and interpret it as an attack on them

personally. In a study conducted by Kramarae and Treichler (1990), several female students expressed discomfort with debate style discussions. They complained that the men talked for a long time and said a lot while the women spoke more briefly and got to the point. They also expressed discomfort with the teachers' attitudes. "They just stand there like a judge and field questions without really entertaining them and force a student to defend her position against the teacher's perspective" (Kramarae & Treichler, 1990, p. 50). The discomfort of being put on the spot and made to look foolish, remarked many women, caused them to not say anything in class.

Some teachers, on the other hand, have discarded the competitive debate-like format. Instead they have adopted more collaborative formats which center on asking open-ended questions and letting comments go unchallenged (Tanizen, 1991). Female students in particular respond favorably to this type of format and participate quite freely when it is being used. In a study conducted by Kramarae & Treichler (1990), one woman reflected on her experience in such a discussion:

It was wonderful. There were integrated, reciprocal, co-existing dialogues happening most of the time. There were people interrupting people and there were all kinds of things happening. The dialogues, the interaction, was in sync so I was very comfortable. But some people told me they were confused and one man said, "Look, at least in other classrooms I know what is right and I know what is wrong, and I can't deal with this." He just didn't show up anymore. I think it is okay to enter into a dialogue and be confused and go through it. But our educational system doesn't allow this.

Clearly, discussion styles which typify women's language learning experiences do not necessarily meet with everyone's approval.

In a study conducted by Tannen (1991), female student participation increased significantly after the discussion format had been changed. Tannen noticed that all of the male students in one of her graduate classes spoke at least occasionally, but that only one female student talked. She broke the class into small groups to discuss issues in the readings and discovered that female students who had never opened their mouths in class were talking away. Since women are more comfortable talking in smaller, more private groups, they felt less inhibited to speak. All of the students in Tannen's study found the small groups interesting, and no one, not even the male students, preferred that the class not break into groups.

It has been found that a student's gender has a significant impact on classroom dominance, but research has found that the gender of the teacher plays an equally significant role. Brooks (1982) found that male students displayed dominant behavior in frequency and duration of speech and in frequency of interruption significantly more in female professors' classes than in male professors' classes. Male students accounted for 33.3% of interruptions of male professors while representing 21% of the students, and accounted for 63.8% of interruptions of female professors while representing 27% of the students. Nearly 75% of all male student interruptions of professors were of female professors. Also, 83.5% of male interruptions of other students occurred in female professors' classes.

Male students may feel more comfortable interrupting female professors, says Brooks, because they do not attribute as high a status to them as they do to male professors. Therefore, male students' dominant behavior would tend to be dampened in male professors' classrooms. Another explanation for the greater proportion of male dominant behavior in female professors' classes has to do with their different teaching styles. Female professors, Brooks contends, may encourage more classroom participation than male professors. Because it has been shown that men tend to dominate classroom talk, this would account for them talking more in female professors' classes.

Most of the discussion in this paper has shown that “classroom talk forms an important arena for the reproduction of gender inequalities in interactional power” (Swann & Graddol, 1988, p. 64). Mens’ control of classroom talk severely restricts the opportunities female students are given to talk, which ultimately leads to restrictions on their learning as well. It is through talking that a student is able to sort through and assimilate new ideas, and it is through learning that they are preparing themselves for life outside the classroom. Due to differential language learning experiences, however, male students and female students have different learning styles. Men prefer a competitive, debate-like style which challenges their knowledge. Women, on the other hand, prefer more of a cooperative style. Because most teachers use a debate-like format as a learning tool, classrooms are more hospitable to men than they are to women. No style is absolute, however, and using just one monolithic classroom structure is not providing equal learning opportunities to all students. Ideally, a combination of diverse methods would best serve the diversity of the students.

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RAZREDNI GOVOR: KAKO SE UČENICE I UČENICI RAZLIČITO KORISTE JEZIKOM

(nastava stranih jezika, razredni govor, spol)

Sažetak

Razredni je govor važno sredstvo učenja. On učeniku omogućuje da svoje ideje otkrije drugima, da ispita, objasni i asimilira nove ideje. Govor omogućuje i da sebi pojasni ideju te da vježba brzu i opsežnu uporabu (Marland, 1997, citirano u Graddol i Swann, 1989). Očigledno je da je učenikovo sudjelovanje na nastavi važna stepenica u njegovu akademskom razvitku i postignuću. No ispitivanja razredne interakcije upozorila su na to da učenici više kontroliraju razredni govor od učenica.

Od osnovne škole do poslijediplomskog studija muškarci na nastavi više govore, više kontroliraju razredni govor i češće prekidaju druge (Zimmerman i West, 1975, citirano u Poynton, 1989). Žene više slušaju i pritom češće podržavaju govornika (Hirschman, 1973, 1974, citirano u Poynton, 1989). Interpretacije takvih razlika pokazuju da taj nerazmjer uzrokuju ovi činitelji: razlike u iskustvu učenja jezika, nastavnikov stav, stilovi i spol.