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Sociological Factors Affecting L2

Acquisition: a case study on how gender affects L2 acquisition.

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate whether gender has an effect on how conversations are carried out in different-gender transactions in L2 classrooms. The study adopted a qualitative approach by examining the amount of talk, interruptions, overlaps, and questions in acquiring L2 conversations. The results of this study revealed that the female speakers show great engagement in the process of interaction in English and due to this feature, they have a great supportive role in continuing the interaction, while the male speakers try to maintain their dominance over the topics by using various strategies such as interrupting, topic-shifting, asking questions, overlaps, criticizing and engaging in conflicts to keep their dominance over the conversation. The conclusion is consistent with the previous research (Gass and Varonis, 1986) which claims that male language learners tend to dominate conversations and produce more language output while females tend to initiate more conversations and receive more input. Further research is needed to examine how gender and culture interact in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: second language acquisition, interaction, gender.

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1. Introduction

Most human beings fall into one of two genders, which is a formation of roles shaped by society and culture (Butler, 1990). To be a part of western culture, individuals go through a process of interaction, through which they form their ideas on gender and the roles that it brings along. According to feminist criticism, the word gender refers to our cultural programming as either feminine or masculine (Tyson, 2006). In other words, women are not born feminine, and men are not born masculine. Rather, these gender categories are constructed by society. Previous studies have shown that males and females have different learning styles, motivations, and attitudes toward L2 (Dörnyei, 2005). Other studies have found that female learners tended to have higher levels of motivation and more positive attitudes towards L2 learning than their male counterparts (Hiroko and Amy, 2004). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to find out whether gender affects L2 conversation by analyzing conversational data from students in L2 classrooms. The study is particularly interested in examining the amount of talk, interruptions, overlaps, and questions in the acquisition of L2.

2. Literature review

In the first part of this section, three concepts need to be introduced in order to address the research question: gender, second language acquisition, and national curriculum.

2.1 Gender

De Beauvoir (1956) suggests that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (p. 35), and according to her view, genes do not determine us to behave as a woman “feminine” or a man “masculine”, but the society and culture shape our gender characteristics. Butler (1990) points out that the concept of gender is not an inherent or fixed characteristic but a performative act.

In addition, Ellis (1994) distinguishes between the two words “sex and gender”. “Sex” constitutes a biological distinction, while “gender” is a social one. Many sociologists currently prefer the term “gender” because it emphasizes the social construction of “male and female.” Ehrlich (1997) maintains that the word sex refers to our biological constitution as female or male while gender is a more social concept that refers to a social category.

2.2 Second Language Acquisition

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is the process of learning another language in addition to the native language (Wray and Bloomer, 2006). It is defined both as a subconscious assimilation of the language, and a conscious process, obtained by learning the rules of the target language. As Ellis (2000) points out, SLA can be defined as a study of how people learn a language other than their mother tongue, inside or outside the classroom. According to Mitchell and Myles (2013), L2 can be defined as a non-native language that is widely used for communication purposes, usually as a medium of education, government, or business.

Furthermore, Kramina (2000) defines language learning as “a conscious process, the product of either formal educational situation or a self-study programme”, while language acquisition is “a subconscious process similar to that by which children acquire their first language.”

Similarly, Krashen and Terrell (1983) differentiate between language acquisition and language learning. In language acquisition, the learner acquires language unconsciously. This is similar to when a child picks up their first language. Whereas, language learning happens when the student is consciously learning the grammatical structures of the language.

2.3 National Curriculum

According to Skolverket's instructions (2018), all the students have the right to participate in education in order to develop their learning process. Skolverket states that education should always establish respect for human rights, individual freedom, integrity, equality and solidarity in the process of teaching. Skolverket also declares that teachers should provide learners with opportunities to communicate in English during the lesson. Since the program's goals in teaching English are to understand oral and written language and be able to formulate and interact with others.

2.4 Studies on the interaction of gender and interaction in the L2 classroom

In this literature review, 4 studies were reviewed to explore the effects of gender in SLA, with a focus on 4 different studies from different countries that are relevant to this current thesis.

These studies are mainly concerned with examining the amount of talk, interruptions, overlaps, and questions in L2 among speakers of the opposite sex.

In the first study, Pica, Holliday, and Morgenthaler (1989) attempted to identify the negotiated nature of Native Speakers and Non-Native speech adjustments; these adjustments can be triggered by and reflected in the form, structure, and content of what NSs and NNSs say in attempting to understand and be understood by each other by negotiation. The participants were 17 male and 15 female Japanese LI speakers learning English L2 (NNSs) and 12 male and 20 female native speakers of American (NSs). The participants were asked to take turns, one drawing a picture then describing it and the other replicating the picture solely on the basis of the drawers' descriptions. The study adopted a qualitative method. The results revealed that male and female NNSs made and received a number of opportunities to request L2 input and modify interlanguage output during interaction with female NSs, but during interaction with male NSs, these opportunities were significantly lower for females than for male NNSs. Briefly, female NSs work harder to sustain conversation, provide more support, and engage in greater accommodation toward their interlocutors. The sociocultural factors of

NNSs were not taken into account in the design of the study since its focus only on NNSs linguistic and interactional behaviors. Three points will be borrowed from this study. First, both male and female NNSs show greater modification of responses during their interaction with females than with NSs. Second, the study will be based on the assumption that L2 is learned through interaction (mutual negotiation). Third, NSs males and females need to give NNSs opportunities to hear in order to modify their interlanguage output.

Second, Pakzadian and Ashoori's study (2018) aimed to explore the role of gender in conversational dominance by analyzing male-female conversation in English (L2). The participants were graduate students (10 male and 10 female students), between ages 18 and 25, majoring in different majors that took part in an English class in Sadr Institute of Higher Education. Participants were asked to choose their topic of interest among hot topics, and they were asked to agree upon the topic of their conversations with their partners. All of the participants agreed upon four conversation topics. The first topic was about the role of women in Iranian society. The second topic was about the role of money in their life, the third was about an ideal partner, and the last was about the role of the hijab in Iranian society.

Conversations were held in a lively and natural manner. The study was carried out through a quantitative approach. The results of this study revealed that women show greater acceptance in conversation and due to this feature, they try to have a more facilitative role in conversation, and men try to maintain dominance over the topic by showing a more assertive mode during stages of topic development and maintenance. Men use different strategies like interrupting women, topic shifting, asking personal questions and raising topics, criticizing and engaging in conflict. Furthermore, men by being more self-oriented, and women by being more other-oriented show varying degrees of dominance. To conclude, the research reveals that in all four topics, men used strong criticisms more than women to dominate the conversation. In other words, male speakers tried to criticize their female partners

intermittently to decrease their confidence and ensure their dominance over them. This study suffers from shortcomings which affect the interpretation of the results. Future research should explore the psychological/linguistic factors which can affect L2 conversation. Three points will be borrowed from this study. First, men play a dominant role by controlling the interaction and frequently violating rules of polite turn-taking. Women are more submissive, seeking permission to speak, and taking more responsibility for encouraging other speakers. Second, the study suggests that learners may need to learn and be taught a broad range of the pragmatic skills necessary to benefit most from participation in L2 interactions while minimizing the disadvantages they may encounter in terms of participation level. For example, learners may need to learn how to produce both (self-oriented and other-oriented) types of initiation, regardless of their gender. Third, gender issues are reinforced and accepted by society even in acquiring L2.

Third, that gender affects L2 conversation has been shown in at least two studies, Kollock, Blumstein, and Schwartz (1985), and Hiroko and Amy (2004). These studies' main purpose was to explore gender dominance by analyzing male-female conversations. These studies looked at examining the amount of talk, interruptions, overlaps, and questions in acquiring L2 conversations. Their results were similar in that they showed that males do less work than females in maintaining L2 conversation and more frequently cut off the development of females' ideas than vice versa. These studies concluded that the female speakers were more engaged in sustaining the discussion while the males tended to interrupt, ask questions, and overlap to demonstrate power and expertise upon the females. Two points will be borrowed from these studies. First, to assess the impact of gender scores on the rate of overlaps and interruptions, questions, and tag questions. Second, these studies suggest that males' and females' usage of minimal responses differs in the sense that males use it to fill the gap when

they should have responded with longer answers while females use minimal responses to show engagement and support.

3. Method

The present qualitative study aims to explore the role of gender in conversational dominance by analyzing 8 male-female conversations in English (L2) as outlined in conversation psychoanalysis (Kollock; Blumstein and Schwartz, 1985). A qualitative approach was chosen to understand and explore how L2 conversation works between opposite-sex speakers.

Therefore, the study is particularly interested in examining the amount of talk, interruptions, overlaps, and questions in L2 conversations.

3.1. Participants

The participants were 4 male and 4 female Swedish learners, from Morgongåva primary school in Heby municipality, aged between 12-13, and all of them from grade 6. The class teacher nominated 8 students to participate in the study because they spoke L2 fluently and had high results in English. The students were informed about the research's purpose, and in order to bridge the gap and avoid possible misunderstandings between the learners, they asked to choose an opposite-sex partner with whom they felt comfortable. The conversations were held in the classroom. All the sessions were audio-recorded and then transcribed by me and with the guidance of Morgongåva's teacher. Since the participants were under 16, a consent form was signed by their parents/legal guardians to ensure their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Furthermore, the parents/legal guardians were provided with detailed information about the research, which included its purpose, procedures, and their right to discontinue their participation at any time. Thus, the data will be handled in line with GDPR laws, which include promoting transparency and trust, and respecting autonomy and human dignity. The data will be stored for no longer than five years.

3.2. Materials

The participants were asked to choose any topic they wanted to talk about in English for approximately 3 minutes for each pair. Therefore, the participants prepared in advance for the topic, which shows their willingness and commitment to participate in a constructive and informed way. This study aimed to compare male and female ways of speaking in English. Through this research, 4 features were investigated; the amount of talk, interruptions, overlaps, and questions, and then counting the most frequent of each measure.

3.3. Procedure/Design

Four steps were followed to conduct this study. The first step was to select participants, which was settled with the aid of a teacher at Morgongåva school in Heby municipality. All participants showed great willingness and support when they were informed about the objective of the study. Second, a comfortable atmosphere was provided to the participants inside the classroom in order to attain a good result. Third, the mobile device was used as a tool to record the experiment in the presence of their teacher. The last step was collecting and analyzing the data that came from the interviews.

4. Results

In this section, 6 extracts were selected to discuss the effect of gender roles on the rate of overlaps, interruptions, questions, and the amount of talk.

The first and the second extracts were selected because there was an overlap in the speech of male and female speakers. Overlaps happen when a female interrupts a male speaker, but the male speaker did not stop talking resulting in two speakers talking over each other.

Extract 1:

M: Where we live there are many places to show visitors. Do you agree with why and why not?

F: I do not understand what you are talking about.

M: Like here in Morgongåva.

M: We have basically nothing.

F: what your favorite Swedish fika?

M: Swedish fika is too tasty. It is obviously kanelbulle. It is not. It is a donut.

M: What's wrong with you?

F: definitely, its pumpkin pie.

This extract shows that there is no mutual interaction between the male and female speakers. Both speakers did not understand each other because they just kept talking over each other. For instance, when the male speaker asks the female this question.” Where we live there are many places to show visitors. Do you agree with why and why not?”. She replies, “I do not understand what you are talking about”. This answer reflects that there is no mutual understanding between the two speakers. Then the rest of the conversation shows that the two speakers keep talking over each other.

The second extract shows that the female speaker tends to extend the topic of their conversation about money, but the male speaker tries to interrupt and prevent the female from communicating her ideas. Zimmerman and West (1975) define interruption as simultaneous speech produced when a second speaker begins speaking in the middle of the current speaker's utterance.

Extract 2:

M: Do you think that money brings happiness?!

F: Mm mm, we need to have money to buy our essential needs and to live a comfortable life and...

M: Let's forget it!

F: forget about what? Aha, I think when I said money is essential ... I meant it's important for our life but it's not the only important thing!

M: I want to clear things out! I have to go to the reception.

The second extract reveals that when the male speaker asks the female this question: “Do you think that money brings happiness?”, the female speaker replies that money “is an essential need and to live a comfortable life.... it's important for our life but it's not the only important thing!”. This section reflects that the female tries to extend the discussion and keeps talking despite the male's interruption.

The third and the fourth extracts were selected because the male speakers talk and ask more questions than females to exert their power and control over the direction of the conversation. Consequently, the development of the topic was affected by creating a gap between the two speakers in terms of experience and knowledge.

Extract 3

M: What do you think about relationships, and which one is important to you?

F: I have a strong relationship with my family and with my friends too. I like to be with my friends more because I feel more comfortable with them.

M: yeah, because you can get help from your family side. They help you if you get in trouble or something so they can fix it.

F: Mmmmm..yeah. if I have problems in school or in my life. I can talk to my dad and have a little conversation with him. So, he can fix my problems. He can take care of me.

M: He can give you tips and advice.

M: It is important to have family and speak to your brothers and sisters to be more comfortable in my life.

The third extract shows that the male speaker talks more than the female speaker when they hold the conversations in English. It also reveals that the male speaker dominates the dialogue by asking and imposing his points of view on the female. In addition, the female speaker validates him by following his “suggestions” in the conversation.

Extract 4:

F: Are you in a relationship? What are you looking for when choosing a partner?

M: I'm not in a relationship. I prefer to wait for the right love.

F: What is the right love like?

M: Emmm....let's forget it? Do you want to watch a movie with me next Saturday?

M: After watching a movie, we can also go to meet our friend Nicolas

F: Emmmmm..

M: Okay, see you on Saturday.

The fourth extract shows that the male speaker talks more than the female and tries to shift the topic when the female asks him about his private life. He turns the conversation in his favor by inviting her to watch a movie next Saturday.

The fifth and sixth extracts were selected because there was an interruption in the dialogue between male and female speakers. Interruptions happen when one speaker holds on to the turn until the completion following an interruption or overlap resulting in the other speaker leaving the turn incomplete and thus losing the opportunity to participate in the conversation (Hiroko, 2004).

Extract 5:

M: Is it good to meet students from other countries?

F: It is not good, but it is not bad like it is

M: are you trying to be racist

F: No, but it is...

M: Let's say that people from Finland

F: I don't understand a single word of what you say. Why do you ask like these questions?

The fifth extract reveals that the male speaker tends to interrupt the female several times. He does not give her enough time to speak out about her ideas about whether it's good to meet foreign students from other countries, so he criticizes her as a racist.

Extract 6:

F: men like women. They have the same rights and equality. If you want to marry someday. What are you looking for in your partner?

M: I am going to choose a kind, gentle girl, a girl who takes care of me, a girl who loves me so much.

F: for me if I am going to choose a partner...

M: let's go to eat lunch

The sixth extract shows that there is no mutual interaction between both genders because the male interrupts and does not allow the other gender to talk about the characteristics of her future partner. So, he interrupts her by reminding her of lunchtime. Based on Pica et al.'s study (1989), acquiring L2 should be based on mutual negotiation.

To conclude, at a general level, all the presented results above reveal that the male speaker attempts to take center stage in the L2 conversation and ignores the female speaker which leads them to talk over each other. The male speakers try to criticize their female partners intermittently to decrease their points of view and ensure their dominance over the topic. The male speakers tend to interrupt females frequently when the females start to speak out their thoughts or present an opposing point of view. Finally, the females were more engaged and motivated to extend the discussion than the males.

5. Discussion

This study investigated whether gender has an effect on how conversations are carried out in different-gender transactions in L2 classrooms. The results of my study echoed the findings of previous studies (e.g., Pakzadian and Ashoor, 2018) which indicated that Iranian male speakers used criticism and interruption to start conflicts which finally promoted their dominance over conversation. Thus, my study shows that male speakers tend to ask many questions to shift the topic to their benefit in order to dominate the conversation. It also reveals that the male speakers tend to interrupt the female speakers when they start to present their points of view. In contrast, the female speakers' interruptions were mostly supportive of the male speakers' speaking by way of clarification questions or addressee-oriented questions that encouraged the male speakers to speak out their ideas.

The findings of my study are in line with some previous findings (e.g., Hiroko and Amy, 2004) which reported that Japanese female speakers were more motivated to sustain and extend the topic during the conversation while the male speakers were less motivated to keep the conversation and tended to impose their power on the female speakers. Therefore, my study reveals that the female speakers tried to extend the topic under discussion and invite

others to talk while the male speakers tended to reinforce boundaries between genders and demonstrate power and expertise.

The results of my current study also supported previous findings of some studies (e.g., Pica et al., 1989) which showed that female NSs worked harder to sustain the conversation, provide more support, and engage positively with their male and female NNSs, but during interaction with male NSs, these opportunities were significantly lower for female than male NNSs. My study shows that the female students were more initiators of negotiation than males.

Moreover, the female students were more positive and supportive to sustain conversation than the male students. Thus, female students were more motivated to learn L2 to a higher extent than males. All the presented studies above support the claim that female students were more motivated and engaged in L2, but they did not shed light on how different cultural aspects like age, educational, and cognitive factors impact English.

To conclude, my study aimed to investigate the effect of gender on acquiring L2. It revealed that male students are less motivated to learn a second language compared to female students. One of the reasons behind the difference in learning L2, as suggested by several studies, females have a stronger desire to communicate in a second language and therefore have stronger motivation and engagement. Nonetheless, the study has two major limitations; since many students in Sweden are not mono-cultural, further research could be conducted to see in what way gender and culture collaborate to affect SLA. In the future, I would like to investigate any differences in how male and female L2 learners benefit from exposure to English outside of the classroom.

6. Conclusion

The present study was conducted to examine the effect of gender on acquiring SLA of male-female dyads of Swedish learners. The findings of this research concluded that the 4 males are less engaged and motivated to learn a second language than the 4 females. First, the male

speakers interrupt females to take control of the conversation and impose their power on female speakers. Second, the male speakers tried to shift the topic to a more comfortable and less risky one at some very important seconds of conversation when the females tried to talk about their private lives. Third, the male also took the use of asking questions to put themselves in the position of power and control the direction of interaction which also created a gap between the two speakers on the level of knowledge and amount of experience relevant to topic development. Finally, the males also tried to criticize their female partners sporadically to decrease their confidence and prove their power over them. Thus, the results of this paper supported Gass and Varonis's research (1986), which claims that male language learners tend to dominate conversations and produce more language output while females tend to initiate more conversations and receive more input. Further research could be conducted to investigate how gender roles within different cultural backgrounds impact SLA.

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