

Competing Discourses in the Algerian EFL Classroom : A Feminist Post-Structuralist Discourse Analysis

الخطابات التنافسية في الفصول الدراسية الجزائرية لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية : تحليل الخطاب النسائي ما بعد البنوي

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Amina Babou, Department of English University of Mohamed Ben Ahmed Oran 2, Algeria
aminababou88@yahoo.fr

Pr. Bakhta Abdelhay, Department of English of Abdelhamid Ibn Badis Mostaganem, Algeria
Bakhta.abdelhay@gmail.com

Gender Studies, Languages and Sociolinguistic Diversity.

Abstract :

In this paper, I intend to move from the theoretical background of feminist post-structuralism of the principles of feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis (FPDA), to recognize how we can apply such approaches to analyse discourse within the English as a foreign language classroom (EFL). My central concern is to delve into the fluctuating power relations through competing discourses. This research seeks to consider the relationship between gender and students' use of 'effective speech' and authoritative talk in the classroom.

Keywords : Competing discourses- effective speech- FPDA.

ملخص

في هذا البحث ، أعتزم الانتقال من نظريات ما بعد المذهب النسائي لمبادئ تحليل الخطاب النسائي ما بعد البنوي (FPDA)، للتعرف على كيفية تطبيق هذه المقاربات لتحليل الخطاب في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL). الهدف من هذا التحليل هو الخوض في علاقات القوى المتذبذبة من خلال الخطابات التنافسية. يسعى هذا البحث إلى النظر في العلاقة بين الجنس واستخدام الطلاب لـ "الكلام الفعال" والحديث الموثوق في الفصل الدراسي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تنافس الخطابات - خطاب فعال - FPDA

• Introduction

In line with the concordance of the social constructionist view and feminist post-structuralism, I seek to survey how gender identities are continuously performed (Butler, 1990) and in conformity with cultural norms to define masculinity and femininity (Cameron, 1997b). This approach permits us to mirror the fact that individuals are not uniquely positioned, but are produced in relations of power that are constantly changing, displaying them at times powerful and at the other times powerless (Baxter, 2003).

In order to pursue the question of this investigation about gender construction in the EFL classroom, it is essential to begin by looking at the perspectives from which the original query of the study arose. From a feminist perspective, I had a keen interest in exploring how language constructs subject identities, how speech is produced, negotiated and contested within particular social contexts. I strive

to describe, analyse and interpret an aspect of spoken interaction perhaps overlooked by critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Baxter, 2003:44)- the context fluctuating ways in which speakers, within any discursive context, are positioned powerful or powerless by competing social and institutional discourse taking the EFL classroom.

- **The Research setting**

The research study took place at the university of Hassiba Benbouali in Chlef (located in the north of Algeria), particularly in the department of the English language. The study examined a mixed-sex classes of Master one and Master two (entitled English literature and civilization). I have observed their oral presentations over a period of four months during their 'feminist tradition in the English novel' module in their Master 1 class. I continued my observation with the same students in their Master 2 course of 'oral presentation' in which they display their proposals of Master dissertation and discuss it with their teachers and their peers. Master 1 class is comprised of 87 students and then, they became 94 with new comers from other universities. The classes comprised unequal numbers of boys and girls (77 females and 17 males). I was aware of particular commonalities between the students' ethnic background, age, class and competence. Yet, I foregrounded gender for specific observation and detailed examination because the crux of this research is to draw a comparative analysis between males and females talk in their oral presentation lectures. As I was inspired by Baxter (2003), I intend to check whether female EFL students are multiply located in discourse and not constituted as victims, and how they can resist particular classroom practices.

- **Methodology**

In keeping with Baxter (2003), the methodology for this research is designed to analyse the ways in which speakers shift between subject positions of 'powerfulness' and 'powerlessness' during influential interactions. I have chosen an ethnographic approach to conduct the classroom study because it is highly conducive to a feminist post-structuralist analysis of the data (Baxter, 2003). By this token, ethnographic research methods are apt in this study because of its epistemological parallels and connections with feminist post-structuralist theory. The epistemological basis of ethnography can be defined in its refusal of the positivist research for universal law in favour of detailed descriptions of the specified experience of life within a particular culture and the social rules or patterns that constitute it (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) (see Baxter, 2003 : 85).

The nature of the ethnographic study allows for a detailed examination of the complexity, subtlety and diversity of discursive practices over a period of time. Considering the efforts of gender upon the speech patterns of the social group, it facilitates to search students' ability to adopt authoritative

speaker positions which are continuously mediated by his/her subject positions within a number of competing discourses in the classroom.

My analysis tends to weave together the diverse and multi-faceted perspectives of the different participants in the study : those of the students of the research class, the class teacher and myself. I hope that this time of reasoning will lead me to a more understanding of what constituted principles of effective speech in the classroom public context in relation to gender. As I stand on feminist post – structuralist perspective, I opt for deploying plural research methods as part of an ‘explicative mosaic’ in the words of Wodak (1996 :23)

Getting practical, I choose multiple methods in this survey to apprehend the contrasting voices and complex interactions of my research participants in both contexts. In an attempt to gain a general diachronic impression, observation and field-notes were first employed over one semester of Master one and another semester in Master two of verbal and non-verbal interactions of both classes in a variety of speaking and listening activities.

In my EFL classroom study, the role I initially chose to adopt most matches Gold’s (1958) second category of participant-as-observer where, as a teacher at the department of English, was fully involved in the site which helped me to get holistic insight into all aspects of the site. More to this point, my role was made explicit and observation was conducted overtly.

- **The English as a Foreign Language Classroom : From theory to Practice**

With almost any ethnographic study, the talk of putting research aims or principles into practice encounters a certain degree of adaptation and compromise (Baxter, 2003). As a teacher at the department of English, I did not experience any restricted access to the research setting which enabled me to make close and detailed observations. In this case study, there was a consistent level of confusion over the exact nature of my role. There was an ambiguity about my position as a participant ended and where my position as an observer began. As a participant-observer, I actually takes on a much more active role with the EFL context. For example, I had the opportunity to fully interact with Master one students in the course of ‘oral presentation’ as I was a teacher of the module. At the same time, I continuously took notes on what was observed and I started observing the students from their Master one to ensure an in-depth knowledge about the participants and their practices.

According to Baxter (2003), feminist post-structuralist perspective does not consider the ever-shifting position of the researcher along a participant-observer axis as an issue. This can be the case as long as it is recognized and analysed rather than glossed over or excused.

On grounds of space, I focus on 6 students in the research study whom I have labelled M1...M6 for males and F1....F6 for females. They have been selected as a heterogeneous group which was

comprised of some speakers who are considered by the teachers (including the researcher as a teacher) to be potentially 'able' speakers, and others as less effective.

I was able to employ a multi-method approach to collecting data in the way I hoped. Through the course of classroom observations, I conducted audio recordings of 10 sessions of oral presentations of Master 2. Besides, 8 audio-recordings of the semi-structured interviews with the teachers and the students themselves. Recordings range in length from 30 to 52 minutes. As for semi-structured interviews, I adopted a common format : a set of generalized, open-ended questions were employed as a starting point for a discussion leaving room for the participants to speak extensively with no intensive interruption for the interviewer. My particular interest was in analysing the discussions among students and their teachers after each presentation.

- **Identifying discourses**

- **5.1 Observing discourses in the EFL classroom :**

Prior to understanding the different discourses detected from my extended observation in the EFL classroom, I shall sketch the process by which my decision to adopt feminist post-structuralist analysis engendered ethnographically as a response to the collected data. My initial plan was to adopt Lazar's (2005 b) feminist critical discourse analysis to explore the construction of gender identities through discourse. For feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA) theorists, there is an interest in the representations formed by discourses which sustain a patriarchal order (Lazar, 2005b :5). Besides, I had the intention to imply CDA (Wodak, 2001) as it was fundamentally concerned with investigating social inequalities as constituted and legitimized by language or in discourse. I was supposing that this concern with analysing the relationship between dominance, discrimination and power as manifested in language, is vulnerable for studying female architects negotiation of gender. However, through the course of my classroom observation, I have noticed that students can continually fluctuate subject positions on a matrix of powerfulness and powerlessness. FPDA concentrates more on individual agency and how identities are flexible and can be multiple.

We cannot deny that CDA and FPDA share the same focus on how identities emerge through discourse, rather considering them as pre-discursive. Yet, FPDA seems to be useful in my analysis on the grounds that it accentuates the emphasis on how identities are flexible and can be multiple, and not necessarily attached to ideological power structures in any given context.

5.1.1 Discourse of gender differentiation

The first discourse I noted is 'gender differentiation' (Francis, 1998; Baxter, 2003) which is primarily based on teachers and students' perceptions about the teachers' treatments of females and males, and the different types of behaviours displayed by students. In her study, Baxter (2003) sets down the extent to which both students and teachers constructed and naturalized their classroom activities and experiences according to forms of gender differentiation. That is to say, the perception of gender categories in binary terms has been naturalized.

Although I was the teacher of 'feminism' for the students of my investigation, I tended to point out that my interest was in students' strategies to achieve effective speech in public discussions and their negotiation for authoritative positions, rather than highlighting my 'gender' issues interest. I was more inclined from the start of my research to allow spaces for the participants' unprompted perceptions and thinking. After having enough spontaneous examples about 'gender differentiation' discourse, I have explicitly elucidated my interest in exploring how their gender identities are continuously constructed through discourse via different positioning in the classroom. The following examples from both teachers and students will suffice to illustrate this point.

F3: I think that this clear that there are differences in males' and females' ways of speaking.. I usually don't criticize others even though I disagree in my mind. Yet M1 and M2 are always dominant, they are always sure that they are right and they don't accept opinions of others.

F6: Any way all men are like that. As you see.. M2 kept teasing me when I was talking about women's right to be independent and have a job. For me, I cannot tease someone especially in a formal context.

F5: We do not think like them (men). I mean the bosses in our society, not only in the English classroom.. Females are sometimes unable to explicitly explain what they think. Whereas, boys assert themselves and they go direct to the point.

Teacher 1 (Oral presentation): May be things are changing, I have noticed that female students interrupted more than their male counterparts. But male students are dominant speakers here. I think that M4 and M6 are being hesitant about their presentations and even when being asked the questions.

Teacher 2 (Oral presentation): I sometimes find differences between males and females.. Females are in some contexts more serious than males. I don't know... may be in other cases roles will be

reversed. It depends on the context and on the student him/her self, but I feel that there is a degree of a gender devides here.

As I stated before, these comments were lightly solicited by me lest they say what they thought I wanted to hear. I opt for checking whether there existed students' talks differentiation based on gender. This common-sense thinking about gender differences in classroom talk is perhaps unintentionally corroborated by the difference theory of language and gender (eg. Coates, 1993; Holmes, 1992; Tannen, 1992).

Along this line, Baxter (2003) adds that gender differentiation discourse is not only emerged to afford common-sense thinking and day-to-day conversation but was also deeply entrenched within the structures of classroom discursive practice. Along a similar vein, rather than promoting gender strategies for one gender, Francis (1998: 139) argues that a critical pedagogy would teach the discourse of gender to students, fostering them to engage critically in the allocation of traits to one gender, and its outcomes.

On the other, according to the discourse of 'gender differentiation', girls may occupy less powerful subject positions, which effectively avail the interests of male students (ibid). This is mainly what makes 'gender differentiation' intricately embedded in classroom discursive practices in how male/female students speak, listen and interact. Besides, competitive strategies of female students such as blocking statements and challenging utterances may position female students, by a traditional discourse of 'gender differentiation', as falsely and incorrectly (Baxter, 2006).

5.1.2 'Leadership talk' discourse

In this context, I recognize the need to borrow and quote Baxter's (2003, 2016) term 'leadership' because, according to Heifetz (1994), authority should be treated as something someone has, that can be acquired and maintained, and leadership as an activity and something someone does.

My awareness of the power of this discourse of 'leadership talk' and its intertextual links with the other discourses emerged from two sources. First, as I mentioned earlier, I have noticed that some members of the classroom (both male and female students) appear to perform a chairing role while either presenting their own works, or when discussing their peers' research projects. These voluble students exhibit some strategies which serve to dominate the conversation by challenging comments, interruptions and reinforcing the assertions made by other peers.

Second, teachers' and students' comments, about how some students tend to be powerfully positioned as dominant and effective speakers as these examples illustrate:

M3: I think that you noticed that F2 always challenges others' views and kept asserting her opposed argument.

Me: Do you think that this is good since she was presenting her work and defending her lines of reasoning?

M3: We got her points, but without such violent explanation. She has the right to convey what she thinks.. but she has to respect the others' opinions.

Teacher 2: Well, the theme of F2 is not so strong and fascinating like some others, but I appreciate her confident presentation and dominant discussion. This is the significant point.. I want to prepare them how they will defend their projects. I liked her way of defending her theme and the rationale quite forcefully.

F4: F2 is single-minded and very courageous. She is my close friend. I know her.. she kept being hard-nosed even in the classroom in front of our peers and teachers. I think that it will be better if she will be more flexible especially the day of the viva voce.

M1: M2 persuades us when presenting his research questions and objectives. He succeeds to get a laugh even while minimizing the serious questions and comments made by F3. His presentation was nice, I would like to listen to presentations or works from this type.

F4: He (M2) explained well his objectives and theme. M2 knows how to chair any discussion. He convinced me ... but it depends on the others. His presentation may be weak for others. Even if he inserts some jokes when discussing his work, he can assert himself at any moment because he is a man. And no one will say a word.

Teacher 2: M2 in all his presentations.. he wants to be the leader when presenting and even in his way of responding to the questions. He is popular with his leading contribution to any discussion in the classroom. He has an intelligent manner in making himself noticed. I feel that he can easily dominate the discussion subtle ways unlike F2.. you feel that the process of dominating the discussion is exhausting in comparison with her male-peer M2.

Whilst F2 tried to resist the essential claim that gender immediately follows in the footmarks of biological sex, gender differentiation discourse sustains the assumption that biological sex prevented

her from commanding a similar level of authority that a powerful male speaker polices. Unequal power relations were thus reflected within the classroom. For instance, the class teacher comments that there was a difference between F2 and M2 in the construction of leadership positions. She asserts that F2 seems to have difficulty in adopting authoritative or leadership positions. This issue of agency may be explained by the tendency to ensure her own sex for 'standing out' (Baxter, 2006: 176). Notwithstanding, Baxter considers that, from a post-structuralist perspective, this is not being regarded as a deficiency in the female character, or even as the effect of male/female socialization into different worlds. Social-cultural and educational discourses rather combine to position females in such a way that they are less likely to employ authoritative roles a speakers than males (ibid).

Moreover, M3 delineates F2 performance of leadership as violent disempowering her strategies for assertiveness and competitiveness for positions of power. Social cultural discourses routinely position girls as non- competitive friends, and educational discourses position girls as responsible for taking the collaborative role in conversations (Swann and Graddol, 1995).

5.1.3 'Collaborative talk' discourse

My observations and interviews demonstrate that the discourse of 'collaborative talk' plays a role in the discourse practices emerged in the classroom. Similar to Baxter (2003), comments made by both male and female students in the interview I made revealed that they are aware of the significance of the rules of collaborative talk in designing and controlling their participation in the classroom discursive practices, as these extracts display:

Me: What make a good speaker in the classroom discussions?

F1: To be direct to the point and clear.. leave space also for others to understand what you mean.

M3: They have to carefully listen to others and agreeing with others or disagree in polite ways. It will be better for some to smile .. this is important in any discussion.

F4: They should be polite and patient.. The presenter is chairing the session..so, we have to respect them and avoid being all bossy.

M3: They.. they (not males) have to avoid interruptions, speak politely.. they have to listen to others and be co-operative. They must be tentative and leave the flow if necessary.

F1: I am sorry, but I am against what you say... You M3.. you are are about to repeat Lakoff's model of women's language weakness. If there is a rule to forbid controlling the conversation..

so, it is applied on males and females. We are all participants here in this class. The teacher will assess everybody.. not you.. not only you (males).

These comments seem to refer to what Baxter (2003) labels 'collaborative talk' discourse which values supportive speech and good language skills. Besides the students' awareness of the rules of 'collaborative talk', there is again an emergence of 'gender differentiation' discourse. M3 explicitly reports that cooperating speech styles should be associated with female students. This idea that women's speech is co-operative and men's competitiveness is an extension of gender differentiation which fuels gender language stereotypes in the classroom context.

What is of particular interest here is F1 realization of M3 denotation about the gender divide in speech/listening codes, and her argument by contesting the equation of powerless speech and femininity. F1 explicitly relates what she understood for M3 with Lakoff's (1975) view of women's language as tentative, mitigated and hesitant.

Indeed, F1 sustains that female students are also social agents in the EFL classroom, and they should not be ostracized from valuable contributions to the discussions, and therefore to their assessment. In this respect, discourses of 'collaborative talk' and 'gender differentiation' set females in conflicting positions, as good, supportive listeners who comply with classroom rules, and at the same time as powerless. Baxter (2002) argues that girls are powerfully located according to the discourse of 'collaborative talk' because this appraises cooperative speech and good listening skills.

With regard to the function of 'collaborative talk', Swann and Graddol (1995) note that his talk "*while apparently democratic, may turn out to be exploitative*" (P.48). Furthermore, Cameron (2000) points out that co-operation and consensus building are strategies that function well in a context of basically egalitarian social relations. However, where relations are unequal, the norm of collaboration may in practice serve the more powerful group-in other words-, 'reproduce the status-quo' (2000: 173).

Unlike the teachers in Baxter's (2003) study who repeatedly point to allegiance to the model of collaborative talk for their students speaking and listening, the class teachers' agenda for classroom management –in this study- was set only at the beginning of the semester. This may be explained by the fact that my participants are adults at tertiary education, in which one time is sufficient to determine rules of collaborative talk.

Teacher 2: After these two sessions of principles of effective oral communication, it is your turn to present your dissertation proposals. In every paired candidate, you will have to listen to the presenters who are going to chair the discussion. 15 minutes will be allocated for each project

presentation and 30 minutes for discussion and asking/ answering questions. I will appreciate your careful listening and respect. Then, raise your hands if you would like to intervene. The presenters will be in charge of distributing turns.

It is clear, then, that the teacher considers the importance of deploying the standards of ‘collaborative talk’-that the ability to listen, take turns and co-operate with others are to be followed by everyone.

5.1.4 Discourse of approval:

My growing awareness of the effectiveness of this discourse upon the spoken interactions of students in the classroom setting arose from two sources. First, a particular motif began to engender in my field-notes, which recorded a direct and clear relationship between the extent to which a student is accepted and approved by his/her peers, and their vigorous positioning and confidence. I set down, for instance, that two ‘popular’ male and one female students seize the whole floor where seldom interrupted by their peers. Conversely to less popular students, M1, M2 and F1 were actively receiving a backing and support for what they said by minimal responses and prompting utterances.

In terms of the students, peer approval refers to the ways in which students’ relations with each other are established and conveyed in terms of notions of “*coolness, popularity, personal confidence, physical attractiveness, friendship patterns and so on*” (Francis, 1998) (Quoted in Baxter, 2003: 92).

In my study, peer approval is lightly interwoven with a discourse of teacher approval: that is ‘*the extent to which a teacher appeared to favour or privilege one student as a speaker over another*’ (Baxter, 2003:92). Contrary to Baxter (2003), teacher approval had not a great effect in my context, in which students led discussions where positions of power were much more openly negotiable, than for a context such as a teacher-directed. In this sense, each presenter is supposed to chair the discussion starting from his/her project presentation to the group discussion. Yet, we cannot deny that like peer approval tends to empower some students and disempower others, teachers favoritism for some students might “well be construed negatively by students, particularly those consumed to be positioned by their peers as ‘cool’ or ‘unboffy’” (Baxter, 2003: 93). The following extracts from class teacher will clarify this theme:

Teacher 2: Yes, F1.. you can clarify more what you have said before

You are right M2.. You can explain

Yes, M2.. go ahead.

In fact, the teacher elected those students to speak rather than others transgressing her own principle of presenters' chairing. Students comment on this as follows:

F4: The teacher favours M2, M1 and F1.. I don't know if you can understand me.. When I was presenting, I gave them the floor, but teacher 1 intervened by nominating them again to speak.

Secondly, I became aware of the power of 'approval discourse' from the various interviews I conducted, both with the group of students and with the teacher. Some of the interviews pointed out spontaneously to the theme of 'popularity' and its influence on the creation of speech privilege for certain students to have the floor. Their comments report that likable and popular students gain self-confidence as they are less interrupted when they speak publicly. In this recognition, students' aplomb will be grown and reinforced by the discourse of approval.

Teacher2: F1 and M1 are very popular speakers who gain respect and support from all their classmates.. they are persuasive and their peers trust what they say. Even me, I find them very effective speakers. They know how to control the conversation whilst securing consent and reinforcement from us.

M4: I am sure that students like M1, M2 and F2 are believing in themselves and they will be accepted as speakers because they are confident.. I liked their presentations despite the difference in their speaking styles to give their arguments.

F4: M1 is popular for all teachers.. the floor is always permitted to him more than others.. he is the first of the promotion so he takes the lion share in the public discussion.

As the last comment indicates, teacher approval may be interpreted by some students as an immediate reward to diligent students and this will endorse their potentials to take control of the conversation in several occasions more than others. Moreover, I have noticed that discourse of 'peer approval' is particularly powerful in potentially defining and limiting the possibilities for students to use authoritative speech in public contexts (Baxter, 2006b).

In this study, I highlight a difference between F1 and F2 linguistic interactions. F1 privileged access to the floor seems to be corroborated by a powerfully positioning within the discourse of peer approval as she is popular enough to be guaranteed by such support from almost other members of the classroom even the teacher. My findings on this issue may be paralleled with the case of 'Sophie' in the study of Baxter (2003, 2006b), who gained dominance and preferential access to the floor by her popularity and

peer/teacher approval. On the contrary, F2 appears as someone who is less popular to be endorsed by the backing of peer approval. As this limits her possibilities to do leadership, she fights to take control of the conversation. And she succeeds most of the times in keeping for her extended turns, the case which seems to draw an analogy with Baxter's (2003) student 'Gina' in her examination of girls' negotiation of leadership in public contexts.

- **Conclusion**

The feminist research requires playing social and discursive construction of gender at the centre of its investigation. FPDA focuses on the complexity of female subject positions and recognize the existence of competing discourses which multiply locate speakers. This offers ways to challenge expected norms through the exploration of language and its role in creating, sustaining and reinforcing discourses. From my observation of the presentations and discussions in the EFL classroom, I became aware of a complex and often ambiguous ways in which speakers (women) are simultaneously positioned as relatively powerless within certain discourses and as relatively powerful in others.

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