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LANGUAGE AND GENDER: DIFFERENCES IN MAKING COMPLAINTS BETWEEN MALES AND FEMALES

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ABSTRACT

Recognizing the significant difference amongst males' and females' usage of languages greatly contributes to the appropriate selection of teaching and learning approaches. To be more specific, in this paper, the aspects of making complaints are carefully examined under some relevant theories and observations, which leads to some implications in teaching and learning a particular functional section of languages: making complaints.

Keywords: complaints, gender, language, communicative language teaching (CLT).

1. Introduction

Long time ago, females would be considered to be inferior in the community, especially in the monarchy. Later on, although feminist movement has gone through a lot of challenges since the late 18th century, it has gained plenty of achievements and global changes in societies. Bell Hook (2000) stated that “Feminism is a struggle against sexist oppression. Therefore, it is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels, as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion and material desires” Some people would think that feminism is just about basic human rights and that it's just a modern social movement. The truth is that the feminist movement is neither modern nor social in its origin, but the religious elements which are rarely mentioned.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Sex and Gender and the differences

When speaking of “sex” and “gender”, there is a common sense that the notions of the two expressions are perceived to be closely synonymous to each other and in some other studies, they are possibly used interchangeably. In *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* (1995), there are two definitions for each phrase as follows:

- **sex:** (excluding other meanings) 1- The two sexes are the two groups, male and female, into which people and animals are divided according to the function of they have in producing young. 2- The sex of a person or animal is their characteristics of being either a male or female.

- **gender:** 1- A person's gender is the fact that they are male or female. 2- You can refer to all male and female people as a particular gender. 3- In grammar, the gender of a noun, pronoun or adjective is whether it is masculine, feminine or neuter.

It can be seen that people cannot be given totally clear definitions and explanations between the two terms. The meaning is still ambiguous, which lead to the misunderstanding and misconception when distinguishing them. However, there are some linguistic scholars who believe that gender is a completely different notion from sex and it is not about biological factors at all. Gender is viewed as a phenomenon which is brought into existence when performed: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a 'natural' kind of being" (Butler, 1990, p.32). According to Cameron (2004), gender is not what you can acquire for one time only but an ongoing accomplishment produced by your repeated actions. It can be concluded that one's gender cannot be equivalent to his sex but some biological basis from his birth, life experiences gained in family and society, which forms his gender identity accompanied with unique individual experiences. Consequently, in each society, there is always a distinctive gender identity and its individuals may comply with the supposed gender identity. In addition, Connell (2002) stated that masculinity and femininity coexist in the same individual and as a result, they should not be seen as polar opposites. There are always aspects and ways of living certain relationships to be considered separately.

To conclude, gender is seen to be negotiated in actual interactions (Wodak and Benke, 1997, p.128-130). Therefore, in this research, the term *gender* is preferably used to convey the concept of gender which is formed of culturally constructed male and female identity rather than the biological variation between the two.

2.2. *Gender and Language Overview*

Because there has been a considerable rise in the number of studies and publications in recent years, language and gender is a growing area of study which attracts a lot of researchers in the world. Among plenty of prominent and excellent studies, there are some researches that have to be mentioned, for example, the relationship between gender and language or discourse (Goddard & Patterson, 2000; Litosseliti & Sunderland, 2002); women's needs and voices in EFL situations (McMahill, 1997, 2001; Saft & Ohara, 2004); and the special concerns and issues of immigrant women (Frye, 1999; Goldstein, 1995, 2001; Kouritzin, 2000; Norton, 2000; Rivera, 1999). Moreover, there has been a growth in the number of conferences held on the issues of gender and language, together with a closer look of applied linguistics and language teaching workshops and conferences to indicate that there are more seminars and individual papers focusing on language and gender (Block, 2002).

Giving a closer observation at the historical development of the conceptualizations of gender in linguistic studies reveals that the viewpoints and the philosophies in the researches have changed over the years. The shift in theories of language and gender resulting from changes in reality has been brought about by political movements; therefore, it presents not only differences in academic perspectives on gender and language, but changes of how gender and language are perceived to work in the world (Cameron, 2004). Cameron once claimed that “a crude historical-typological account of feminist linguistic approaches since 1973 would probably distinguish between three models of language and gender (p. 33)”: the deficit model, the cultural model and the dominance model.

2.2.1. Deficit model

In this kind of model, women are viewed as underprivileged speakers, especially in the professionally communicative world, due to the upbringing and socialization as females (Block, 2002). Lakoff's theory (1973), also mentioned that the males' speeches are accepted as the norms while the females' ones are perceived to be different. Cameron (1995) pointed out that the load forced on the females in the society to monitor both men's and women's languages may lead to the self-cleanup of their faulty language production afterwards. Moreover, the book entitled *What Every Successful Women Knows* (2001) by Ellig and Morin provides professional women with some effective and powerful strategies which help to move forward into the men's professional business world (Block, 2002) as follows:

... The lesson for successful women seeking the breakthrough to power? Grab the magic marker, move right up to the flipchart, and say what you have to say. Don't wait for acceptance... and don't wait, much less ask, for permission to speak. Just say it. (Ellig & Morin, 2001, p.109)

It can be easily noticed that women need to adjust their own language and alter to a male tone to gain something that they normally cannot. They need to be confident and assertive players to work efficiently in the world of business. In Block's views, the idea that men naturally gain these capabilities since their childhood and women need to adopt and imitate those male's features in order to challenge men and to become more successful in the world is stated as follows:

... the view of gender is essentialized in that it is about having certain characteristics which are determined by the environment and which are stable throughout one's lifetime. It is also imminently conservative in that it requires that women follow modes of behavior laid down by men, as opposed to challenging them (p. 51-52).

2.2.2. Cultural difference model

As for this model, both males and females belong to separate but equal cultures that form the development of individuals who are socialized into them (Block, 2002). It means that boys and girls are socialized into various ways of relating to each other in their early same-sex interactions, and therefore they can acquire variably communicative forms within the society

or community they live in (Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004). Women's communication is always inferior to men's and their association is problematic at least in part due to cultural conflict (Block, 2002). Therefore, it can be interpreted that in case of their communication breakdown, it is caused by misinterpreting the other party's form of interaction (Tannen, 1993). It is urged that they should learn to be bi-cultural to understand mutually.

2.2.3. *Dominance Model*

According to Bergvall (1999), most researchers used to link negative evaluations of females' language to the social domination by males. In the studies of language and gender, it is suggested that men should acquire and maintain the power over women in social interaction by means of interrupting and overlapping women's speech by using high tones of voice and criticizing women (Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004). Therefore, most of the scholars needed non-sexist English language use (Cooper, 1989). Block (2002) claimed that "In this model women are perceived to perform their 'woman-ness' in an ethnomethodological frame as they continually negotiate their position of relative powerlessness vis a vis men" (p. 53). It is undeniable that the deficit model was more conservative whereas the dominance one was quite radical. He also said that the dismantling of the entire social structure edified over years which has offered men the upper hand over women (Block, 2002). In the view of Giddens (1991), dominance model is not influential enough to present and clarify the rising complexity of gender and language use.

3. **Sex preferential speech features**

3.1. *The reasons for differences between men and women in using language*

Different sexes show variably preference for using certain linguistic features and others. Therefore, the difference in language use among genders is less noticeable. There are some studies supporting the idea that women use more socially accepted variants of language than men, including Fischer (1958) and Bonvillian (1997) about pronouncing /ing/ and /in/ in a New England school together with Wolfram (1969), Trudgill (1974) and Milroy (1980) for the same issue. Unfortunately, those findings are unable to fully convey the meanings as required and expected. It can be found out that females use more socially accepted variants only in formal situation and their speech is somewhat considerably similar to that of males.

In Holmes's research (Holmes, 1992), there are a lot of causes for this issue to be studied. First of all, social status of males and females are so dissimilar because women seem to be more status-conscious than men, which leads to the standardized form in use. As long as language can define class itself, the use of standard variety may become increasingly essential to them. Secondly, women are thought to be guardians of society's values and expected to be well-behaved, even from their childhood to adulthood. They are supposed to live in harmony despite the conflicts or arguments. In addition, living with a

subordinate position, they must be polite in any cases in order not to offend the powerful group – the ordinate one. Standard speeches are required to be employed in all social conversations so that they can save their faces in speaking and communicating with one another. Moreover, the vernacular form which has a covert prestige will form connotes masculinity and toughness; therefore, the men always regard this form positively and employ in their daily conversation more frequently.

3.2. Theoretical constructs underpinning gender research

3.2.1. Deficit theory

In 1975 Robin Lakoff identified a "women's register" which she argued served to maintain females' inferior role in society. Her work has been greatly influential in the language and gender studies which look into their speech from a post of disadvantage. She claims that a female speaker has to face a double bind, which means that, on the one hand, she will be disrespected if not learning to speak like a lady; otherwise, she will be criticized for not maintaining her own. Although Lakoff's claims are not based on studies she carried out, but arrived at intuitively, women's language are classified as three following categories:

- It lacks the resources that allow women to speak strongly;
- It encourages women to talk about trivial subjects;
- It requires women to speak tentatively.

In addition, other researchers) have studied the field of language and gender in the similar manner but from the view of male dominance. Zimmerman and West (1975) and West and Zimmerman (1983) claim that men always use interruptions to silence others more habitually than women. Holmes (1986) also looked into the hedge "you know" to determine if it was more routinely employed by women as Lakoff claimed, then found out that it was used to convey linguistic impression. As for West and Zimmerman, the interruptions were more frequently used by men as a device to proclaim their power and control in every conversation, which may not be totally clear enough. Tannen (1989) later points out that the way of using interruptions can be seen as an interpretive rather than descriptive act, which explains that it is natural for one person to start a talk as soon as the other finishes.

Moreover, in the studies of O'Barr and Atkins (1980), they searched for some characteristics of women's speech in both male and female expert and non-expert witnesses. Then they concluded that the features were not related to the gender but a composite of aspects of powerless language. Later on, Ochs (1992) carried out a study relating to how language is used in creating social identities. He argued that referential markers of gender are very rare. English was taken as an example for referential markers, including third person pronoun singular. It can be interpreted that gender is non-referentially indexed in language, then non-referential indexes are nonexclusive and

constitutive. In general, these studies over-emphasize the men's power and their dominance towards women in conversations.

3.2.2. *Difference theory*

This kind of theory aimed at challenging negative stereotypes by observing women's interactional styles which, in Kalcik (1975) report, are different from men's. Kalcik claimed that women in consciousness-raising groups elicited participation from underprivileged members, did not interrupt each other, and presented themselves as sympathetic with facial expressions, gestures, and back-channeling devices while others were telling their stories. Troemel-Ploetz (1992) said that the features of women's speech are collaboration, cooperation, balancing of speaking rights, symmetry and mutual support. Women are supposed to have all the valuable human's characteristics and they can handle things better.

Freeman and McElhinny (1996), also agreed that women are underprivileged and they wanted to offer some definitions and explanations to convey the differences between men and women and their opposite characteristics. Like other contemporary scholars, Freeman and McElhinny only engaged with the conservative thoughts that differences in sexes are biologically given and socially unchangeable.

Maltz and Borker, drawing the theoretical viewpoint from Gumperz, mentioned the use of minimal responses, which means that when a woman utters some minimal responses, the man naturally regards it as an agreement. On the other hand, if the man makes those things, he will be thought to be unattentive.

In the book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, Tannen (1990) argued that men always find themselves the most superior in communities and regard conversation as "negotiations in which people try to achieve and maintain the upper hand if they can, and protect themselves from others' attempts to put them down and push them around. Life, then, is a contest, a struggle to preserve independence and avoid failure" (Freeman and McElhinny, 1996). However, females are thought that "conversations are negotiations for closeness in which people try to seek and give confirmation and support, and to reach consensus. They try to protect themselves from others' attempts to push them away. Life, then, is a community, a struggle to preserve intimacy and avoid isolation" (Freeman and McElhinny, 1996).

Investigating a wide variety of speech using this model, Tannen claimed that men and women present various ways to view and understand the whole world. Eckert and McConell-Ginet (1992) were convinced that people strategically manipulate differences to create their dominance. As a result, it is undeniable that males always want to control the interactions in their own ways of communication.

It can be summarized that both Lakoff and Tannen have been criticized for not properly questioning the approval of men and women as categories in the studies and isolating their analysis on gender's speech from communicative contexts.

3.2.3. Social Constructivist Theory

There have been some claims that when gender is studied in contrastive conditions, men's and women's interactions are best studied in cross-sex ones while children's speech is best observed in same sex interactions. Thorne (1990) stated that "we load the interaction of adult men and women with heterosexual meaning, but we resist defining children's mixed gender interaction in those terms". As a new way of analyzing data has to be found, in the book *He-Said-She-Said*, Goodwin (1990) officially supported the activities defined as "a fuzzy category whose focal members are goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded, events with constraints on participants, settings, and so on, but above all, on the allowable contributions. Examples of paradigm include teaching, a job interview, a jurial interrogation, a football game, a task in a workshop, a dinner party, and so on" (Levinson, 1992, p. 69). Because the social and cognitive structures of members of a society use to build appropriate events change in different activities, they have to have their own access to a variety of cultures and social identities.

As Eckert and McConnel-Ginet (1992) suggested, what feminist scholars need to do is study how gender is constructed in communities of practice which is defined as "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, belief, values, power relations – in short, practices - emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor" (p. 464). Therefore, the researchers are supposed to be aware of the fact that social identity and community membership is the consequence of continually mutual construction, contestation and reinforcement of social meaning.

4. Conclusions and Implications

In this paper, the connection between language and gender is analyzed to have an insight into how they affect each other in order to focus on the existence of the relationship between gender and achievement in teaching and learning English as a second language. Therefore, it is not easy to distinguish males and females in terms of their language learning strategies.

The studies also help to indicate that women are absolutely more skillful and successful than men in terms of using language because they employ more strategies in language learning and using.

In recent years, with the useful application of CLT (Communicative Language Teaching), the communication between male and female students in classroom has been improved greatly. With the deep understanding in language and gender, students may acquire language in a better way in social conversations.

Moreover, it is urged that there should be some further experimental studies and educational and social researches about the positive and negative effects of the correlation of language and gender in English language teaching for Vietnamese students. Researchers

need to further investigate why women use more strategies than men and what other factors may affect the achievement and language learning strategies. In addition, it can be seen that the age of males and females has not been included in the studies mentioned. There should be more investigation into this factor and more comparison among same age groups to determine whether there are any differences among themselves.

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NGÔN NGỮ VÀ GIỚI TÍNH:

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TÓM TẮT

Xác định được sự khác biệt trong cách sử dụng ngôn ngữ giữa nam và nữ góp phần to lớn vào việc lựa chọn phương pháp dạy và học ngoại ngữ. Cụ thể, trong bài nghiên cứu này, các khía cạnh của hoạt động than phiền được xem xét kỹ lưỡng thông qua các lý thuyết và quan sát, từ đó tác giả đề xuất các định hướng dạy và học một cấu trúc chức năng sử dụng ngôn ngữ: đó là cách than phiền.

Từ khóa: than phiền, giới tính, ngôn ngữ, phương pháp dạy tiếng giao tiếp.