Reshaping Gender Identities and Ideologies through Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

Many of the early studies in the field of language and gender explored the relation between language and gender in binary oppositions framework and essentialist perspective, which resulted in an over-simplication of gender roles, linguistic phenomena, and its relation with second/foreign language learning (Gordon, 2008). Although all of those approaches had indeed succeeded in identifying the gender inequalities as the result of male's control over various resources, it failed to acknowledge the social, economic, and political contexts which influence the construction of gender identity, especially in foreign learning contexts. The emergence of new perspective, which is largely influenced by *the post structuralist tradition*, contributes to the new and more complex understanding of the relation between gender identity and foreign language learning. It implies that in the process of foreign language learning learners are not merely acquiring the linguistic knowledge (grammar, lexicon, *etc*), but also acquiring the social and cultural aspects of the target language, including gender identities, ideologies and norms.
Hence, in this paper I would like to explore the relation between gender identities and ideologies, and foreign language learning. The discussion will revolve around how the learners' L1 gender ideologies influence their motivation or resistance to foreign language learning which eventually affect their success as well as failure. I also expect to explore what particular factors that might contribute to the transformation of gender ideologies and identities in foreign language learning.

Keywords: The post structuralist tradition, Gender Ideologies, Gender Identities, Foreign Language Learning

Introduction

Many of the early studies of language and gender explored the relation between language and gender in binary oppositions framework and essentialist perspective, which resulted in an oversimplication of genders role in linguistics phenomena (Gordon, 2008). The early work in this field which mostly used *the deficit approach* as their research framework viewed the language spoken by women as inferior. Scholars, like Robin Lakoff, claimed that women speak a powerless uncertain, weak, excessively polite, language, characterized by some distinguishable linguistics features, such as relying on hedges, emphatic stress, and hypercorrect grammar (Pavlenko & Piller, 2001). In its later development, *the deficit approach* received a lot of severe criticisms, since it views men's language as the norm and tended to make an overgeneralization claims seeing women as a homogenous, undifferentiated group. Moreover, the critics argued that many of the claims regarding the male female differentiated speech were overgeneralized to all men and women based on limited research sample (white, North American, and middle class).

As a result, another approach emerged in response to those criticisms called *the dominance approach*. This new approach were intended to interpret Lakoff's work within a new paradigm which were trying to see the women's and men's language differences is the result of one gender dominance over another and the imbalance distribution of power between these two different genders.. The speech differences are caused by a powerful control that male has over various material and symbolic resources, including language.

Like its predecessor, this approach was not immune from the criticisms. Scholars, like Penelope Eckert & McConnell-Ginet who later came up with the concept of *community of practice* (COP), argued that although *the dominance approach* had indeed succeeded in identifying the gender inequalities as the result of male's control over various resources, it failed to acknowledge "the social, economic, and political contexts which influence the construction of gender identity" (Gordon 2008, p. 233).

Drawing upon the sociolinguistic variationist perspective, *the difference approach* gained its currency in response to the critics of *the dominance approach*. The proponents of this approach believe that the differences in language use between male and female merely reflect sex based division that do not involve any power relation concerns. In this approach, gender was seen as one of many other attributes such as class age or race, determining individual's relation to linguistics variation (Pavlenko & Piller, 2001). All three approaches mentioned above seem to draw a similar assumption in regard to gender issue. They view gender as categorical and fixed notion which is innate and stable overtime.

How then those were used to explain the role of gender in second language acquisition in general, and foreign language learning (FL learning hereafter) in particular? Since they view gender as an individual variable in language learning, monolithic, and not as a complex system of social relations, it was argued that there seems to be different trajectories of FL learning that the both male and female FL learners take. Those trajectories are similar within, but different between the genders. If we assumed gender to be fixed and binary in the contexts of FL learning, then we can draw generalized claims that a homogeneous gender group is affected by uniform cognitive and affective factors in regards to FL learning outcomes. One of the most widely cited examples is the myths of female superiority in FL learning deriving from *the difference approach*. It generalized that female learners would do better than males. It was believed that female actually have a better learning strategy implying gender plays a significant role in the way that learners approach the task in FL classroom. For example, Burstall's study in 1975 (as cited from Ehrlich, 1997) reported that the female learners achieved a significantly higher score

in all tests measuring French proficiency compared to male learners. Ehrlich also points out many other similar studies that reflected a relatively similar tendency at that time.

However, these universalized claims were seen as counter productive by many. Therefore, the recent research work in the field of language and gender research has rejected the essentialist's approach which views social identities, like gender, as fixed and unitary. Most of the scholars, who are largely influenced by *the post structuralist tradition*, come into one agreement that social identities are dynamic and multidimensional. They are constructed through the interaction of linguistic forms with other social variables, such as social status, ethnicity, gender, age, etc within specific physical situations.   Based on this perspective, each person projects different identities, whether s/he realizes it or not, in different social contexts with different people. Therefore, an individual may have completely different social identities from one interaction to another depending on the goal of this interaction and his/her interlocutors, and language use is inevitably among the most salient factor in projecting those identities.

Moreover, the studies of scholars like Eckert and McConnell-Ginnet's, although not specifically in FL learning context, has helped us to understand that gender is embedded "within the construction of other socially significant categories, which are constituted through language" (Gordon 2008, p. 233). Another important point emphasized by the proponents of this view is that they never assume that the superiority of one gender category in L2 learning as the result of biological inheritance. Instead, they acknowledge that "gender, as one of many important facets of social identity, interacts with race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, age, and social status in framing students' language learning experiences, trajectories, and outcomes" (Norton & Pavlenko 2004, p. 504).

This fresh paradigm contributes to the new and more complex understanding of the relation between gender identity and FL learning. It implies that in the process of second language learning the learners are not merely acquiring the linguistic knowledge (phonological, morphological, and syntactical aspects of a language), but to particular extents also acquiring the social and cultural aspects of the target language, including gender norms. As a result, the FL learners may construct different gender identities and ideologies when speaking in target language from those when speaking in their native language. According to Willet (1995), this relates to the claim that language learning is the process of becoming the member of a socio cultural group.

Hence, in this paper I would like to explore the relation between gender ideologies and identities, and FL learning and socialization. The discussion will revolve around how the learners' L1 gender ideologies influence their motivation or resistance to FL learning which eventually affect their success as well as failure. I also expect to explore what particular factors that might contribute to the transformation of gender ideologies and identities in L2 learning.

Gender Ideologies and Identities in FL Learning

As many people concurred, like other social activities, FL learning does not operate in a vacuum. It is influenced by many factors, including sociohistorical as well as political context, interactional context, and individual agency. Moreover, it seems inevitable that gender ideologies and identities in a local speech community can fundamentally affect the students' access and opportunities for classroom learning. The effects can be two folds. L1 gender ideologies can be supportive as well as unhelpful for the learners.

What sort of roles gender ideologies and identities play in FL learning has become the interest many FL researchers. Norton & Pavlenko (2004) identifies three areas in which gender

influences the opportunities for language socialization. First, gender identities and ideologies play a significant role in enhancing or limiting access to linguistics resources. In this sense, women and men may have different level of exposure, attitudes, motivation, and incentives in learning FL as the result gender differences. For example, in a community where second language skills are related to the access to economic and social and economics benefits, women are not allowed to learn or speak the language, since this kind of privilege belongs to male member of society. Those are done by the enforcement of many kinds of gatekeeping practices in order to restrict women's mobility, access to mainstream language education, and the workplace (Pavlenko & Piller, 2001). Hill's (as cited from Ehrlich, 1997) study of women's speech reveals that most Mexican men are bilingual (speak Spanish and indigenous language "Mexicano") while women tend to be monolingual (only speak "Mexicano") as the result of gender labor divisions restricting women to participate in regular wage labor in which in turn, she argued, also prevents the women from having access to linguistic resource, i.e. Spanish. In most studies, researchers have shown that women's access to FL classroom is also "constrained by many factors, such as their domestic responsibilities as wives, mothers, housewives, and caretakers, by transportation and safety concerns" (Pavlenko & Norton 2004, p. 305). To my experience, those kinds of gender ideologies are well maintained in some parts of the world where males dominate all walks of life.

Second, gender identities and ideologies influence the interactional opportunities for male and female learners in classroom. Willet (1995) using ethnographic approach concludes that the students of "room 17" do not merely learn discrete language skills by participating in phonics seatwork, but also construct their own social relations, identities, and ideologies. There is a process of identity negotiation and production among the participants in which sometimes affected by the larger society. For example, she points out that the practice of seating boys next to girl as an attempt to control their behavior is the result of ideologies about gender held by the wider society. No wonder, the students' gender identities and ideologies formed in that local interaction are representation of the picture of gender identities and ideologies within the society itself. Further, Willet also argues that the various constructions of social relations, identities, and ideologies will in turn affect the learner's access to FL learning. She contrasts the different experiences between the female learners and the only male students have in room 17. I have to agree with Gordon (2008) that by doing so, she actually wants to demonstrate how the construction of gender portrays the girl as successful learners and the boy as problematic learner.

Third, Norton & Pavlenko state that the intersection of language ideologies and gender ideologies influence the learners' investment in or resistance to learning. This important point was also already explored by many researchers. There seems to be open possibility that FL learning and socialization may lead to the transformation of learners' gender identities and ideologies. Gordon (2004) shows that Lao man and woman have to redefine their identities as they deal with a new linguistic and cultural environments, in which she argues that language socialization is one of the main contributors to the process of redefining identities. Although Gordon does not focus her discussions on the contexts of formal language classroom, she provides us with significant insights regarding the possibility of the learners' gender identities and ideologies shifting. A more interesting finding comes from Kobayashi's (2002) study of Japanese female English-language learners. Here, she argues that female students tend to have a more positive attitude compared to male students toward English learning, since it relates to the opportunity to expand broader gender identities for women. Therefore, the female learners have more chances to go through a process of reconstructing their gender ideologies and identities by

learning English. They can use English as language of empowerment, a possibility that is not available when they speak Japanese.

However, the process of transformation does not always run smoothly. The learners at some point may reject the new gender ideologies and identities 'imposed' through language use, especially when there are many contradictions between L1 gender ideologies and target language ideologies. Siegal (1996) investigates the role of language learner subjectivity in the acquisition of sociolinguistic competency a second language by choosing an American female Japanese learners as the subject. Mary (the subject of her research) resisted to use some Japanese linguistic forms, since she perceived it as problematic, putting herself in a lower position in terms of power relations. Whether she is aware or not with her choice, her resistance implies that using language involves making choices where each speech act becomes an 'act of identity' (Bourne as cited from Siegal, 1996). It seems to me that Mary's ways of understanding the world and her sense of herself when speaking in target language will directly affect the degree of her success in acquiring Japanese sociolinguistic competency.

Conclusion

Considering the possible transformation on gender ideologies and identities, we can actually use FL learning as a vehicle to create social change, particularly creating a friendlier and just world for female member of the society. As shown by research works I cited above, gender ideologies develop and change overtime in the FL learning settings. FL teachers can start by using strategies discussed in Norton & Pavlenko (2004). They suggest some important steps in order to address the issue of gender in L2 classrooms. Those can be done in four ways: "curricular innovation, …; feminist teaching practices, materials and activities; topic managements…; classroom management and decision-making practices" (p. 504-5). For example, some concrete strategies that L2 teacher can take is incorporating topics like sexual harassment, domestic violence, and sexism in L2 classroom settings or using grammar teaching by exploring gay and lesbian issues.

About the author

Rizal has a Master's degree in Intercultural Communication from Graduate School of Education University of Pennsylvania. Rizal joined English Department, Sampoerna School of Education in 2011 where he teaches *Introduction to The Study of Language*, *American Culture and Society Studies*, and *Discourse Analysis*. Before coming to SSE he held teaching appointments in a number of education institutions.

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