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**Dominant Gender
Discourses and Boys' Interest
in Foreign Language Learning**

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Language learning has long been regarded as a female domain in both commonsense notions about gender and academic research. In fact, there have been numerous studies on girls' superior performance in language education (Arnot et al. 1996; Burstall 1975; Boyle 1987) and the reasons behind this phenomenon, and more recently, boys have been painted as victims of feminized language learning in education politics (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1998). According to poststructuralist research, however, gendered identities are continuously constructed in discourse, which links specific behavior to images of femininity or masculinity. Based on the assumption that these understandings of gender identities play a role in students' attitudes towards certain practices, this paper will examine the relationship between dominant gender discourses on language learning and boys' interest in Foreign Language Learning (FLL). For this purpose, poststructuralist gender theory will be applied to popular narratives based on dominant gender discourses, namely sex difference research and male underachievement in language education, in order to show that their perpetuation of the idea that language is a female domain is a possible factor in boys' lack of FLL interest. The paper aims to illustrate that dominant gender discourses should be problematized as a hindrance to boys' FLL interest rather than reinforced through educational politics and academic research.

KEYWORDS

Gender discourse, foreign language learning, masculinity

1. INTRODUCTION

Language learning has long been regarded as a female domain in both commonsense notions about gender and academic research. In fact, there have been numerous studies on girls' superior performance in language education and the reasons behind this phenomenon (Arnot et al. 1996; Burstall 1975; Boyle 1987), and more recently, boys have been painted as victims of feminized language learning in education politics (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1998). According to poststructuralist research, however, gendered identities are continuously constructed in discourse, which links specific behavior to images of femininity or masculinity (Litosseliti 2006; Jule 2008). Based on the assumption that these understandings of gender identities play a role in students' attitudes towards certain practices, this paper will examine the relationship between dominant gender discourses on language learning and boys' interest in Foreign Language Learning (FLL) by consulting relevant literature. At the beginning, the main ideas of poststructuralist gender studies will be discussed in order to provide a theoretical background. Subsequently, two different narratives about language learning which are based on dominant gender discourses will be examined, namely sex difference research and male underachievement in FLL. Finally, gender discourse theory will be critically applied to these two narratives to support the argument that dominant gender discourses are a possible factor in boys' lack of FLL interest. The paper aims to illustrate that dominant gender discourses should be problematized as a hindrance to boys' FLL interest rather than reinforced through educational politics and academic research.

2. GENDER IDENTITY AND DISCOURSE: A POSTSTRUCTURALIST APPROACH

In postmodern gender studies, sex and gender have generally been distinguished as two different markers of male- and femaleness, referring to "sex" as the biological difference between men and women, and to "gender" as a social or cultural construct (Litosseliti 2006, 10). Theories about biological differences between men and women have been criticized by gender theorists, who argue that these traits are not inherent, but determined and learned through culture and society (Litosseliti 2006). Therefore, any perceived differences in gender characteristics cannot be regarded as natural and need to be examined in a cultural context.

In addition, gender theory has become increasingly complex in recent years. For instance, the plurality of gender identities has been emphasized in contemporary gender theory. Thereby, a number of possible

"femininities" and "masculinities" can exist within cultural contexts and individuals (Litosseliti 2006, 61). It is important to note, however, that gender is simply one dimension of identity and is interrelated with a variety of other factors, such as age, ethnicity or class. Furthermore, poststructuralist research has focused on the active role of individuals as agents in their own gendered identities. Instead of intrinsic categories which can be seen as either natural or constructed, gender identity is dynamic and practiced through ongoing (deliberate and unconscious) decisions (Litosseliti 2006), which are in turn informed by available discourses.

According to discourse theory, discourses establish possible knowledge about a specific field or group. For example, legislation discourse defines the legality or illegality of certain acts; likewise gender discourse produces certain "truths" about masculinity or femininity, such as beliefs about gender differences. However, these discursively constructed "truths" are not necessarily objectively true, and instead reflect power relationships and the boundaries of knowledge within a culture (Jule 2008, 51). Applied to gender theory, dominant gender discourses define what can be "known" about men and women and these discourses are created by linking specific behavior to images of masculinity and femininity. Gee (1991, 3) defines discourse as "[a] socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network'". For example, certain activities (such as FLL) might be associated with being more or less masculine. Consequently, these discourses exert powerful influence on identity formation.

Namely, gender discourses produce a number of acceptable "subject positions" from which individuals form their gendered identities (Simpson 1997, 202). These subject positions, which are not natural occurrences but represent normative social constructs (Pavlenko and Piller 2008), can be, for instance, "wife", or "father", and implicate the (in) appropriacy of specific behavior. Thus, individuals actively perform their gender identity by making choices from the different discourses and positions available to them (Litosseliti 2006), which influence the way they think and act. These gendered beliefs could arguably relate to boys' underperformance in FLL; in fact, languages may be presented as something that "boys don't do" (Carr and Pauwels 2006, 41) by dominant discourses about masculinity.

3. DOMINANT GENDER DISCOURSES IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

3.1. SEX DIFFERENCE RESEARCH

One of the most persistently prevalent gender discourses is the discourse on sex differences, which is reflected both in commonsense opinions about gender and academic research. This holds particularly true for the field of language learning. While the belief of female superiority in language learning is widely spread among laypeople, research concerned with links between gender and language (learning) has at large been preoccupied with looking at possible neurological and sociological differences between men and women (Schmenk 2007).

One of the most popular gendered language theories is the distinction between "cooperative" and "competitive" speaking styles, which have been associated with female and male speakers respectively. It has been argued that these styles implicate different ways of handling turn-taking, interruptions, backchannels, etc., which results in "women put[ting] far more effort than men into maintaining and facilitating conversation" due to their cooperative speaking style (Coates 1986, 154). With regards to the language classroom, this distinction in speaking styles has been linked to girls "learn[ing] the subject in an enjoyable and friendly manner, rather than in a competitive or individualistic way" (Litosseliti 2006, 80), which is associated with a masculine speaking style. Thus, female students supposedly have a linguistic advantage in FLL.

Furthermore, dualistic theories in language learning research have been applied to the male/female dichotomy in order to explain gender differences. For instance, Gardner's and Lambert's (1972) theory of "integrative" and "instrumental" orientation towards language learning has been linked to female and male learning motivation respectively (Schmenk 2007). Whereas integrative motivation, which implies the desire for social identification with the target language group, supposedly relates to feminine traits, instrumental motivation, i.e. learning a language for practical reasons such as career advancement, is linked to masculine traits (Oxford, Nyikos and Ehrman 1988, 326). Another theory which has been connected with gender differences is the dichotomy of field dependence and field independence, often called "globals" and "analytics", two different cognitive learning styles (Schmenk 2007, 126). According to Oxford (1994, 142), "[f]ield-independent L2 learners, often males, may have an advantage in analytical reasoning tasks", whereas "[f]ield-dependent individuals, often females, may have an edge in [...] sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence". In sum, these theories suggest that female learners of a foreign language have an advantage over their male peers due to various factors associated with their gender.

So far, a number of significant studies which oppose sex difference theories in language learning have been published. For instance, the empirical findings of Freed and Greenwood (1996) show that cooperative

speech was observed in both male and female same-sex friendly conversations, thus concluding that the responsible variable is not gender, but a particular type of talk. Furthermore, dualistic linguistic theories such as the models of integrative/instrumental motivation or field-(in)dependent learning style have often been criticized by contemporary researchers for being one-dimensional (Schmenk 2007), yet they continue being used uncritically in sex difference research because they fit their equally binary theories. In fact, the supposedly peculiar masculine and feminine traits which are fundamental to sex difference research have continuously been disproven by empirical and neuroscientific findings, which deny the existence of such clear-cut differences and imply a significantly more complex picture (Ehrlich 1997; Schmenk 2002; Sunderland 2000).

Despite these findings, sex difference research perseveres due to its legitimization through dominant gender discourses. Rather than on empirical research, these theories rely on the argument that differences between the sexes exist and reflect meanings which are determined by stereotypical notions about femininity and masculinity (Schmenk 2007). As was discussed above, these notions are created in discourse; however, sex difference research falsely presents their central argument (which is, in fact, sex difference) as a scientific fact. One possible reason for this contradictory behavior is that dominant discourses are insistently convincing and difficult to refuse due to their status as objective "truth" in society. Suitably, Cameron (1996, 49) argues about the field of gender and language that "[people's] desire to believe that 'women are thus and men are so' is strong enough to compensate for what, from a purely academic standpoint, are obvious short-comings or contradictions in the evidence presented." Notably, the repetition of discursive knowledge about sex differences further sustains dominant gender discourses, which will be discussed in more detail in Section 4.

3.2. BOYS AS UNDERACHIEVERS

Since the 1990s, the underperformance of boys has been a major concern of gender-related education debates (Epstein et al. 1998; Murphy and Elwood 1998). This lack of boys' engagement in school is attributed to a growing male culture which is disinterested in academic effort and has led to emotional reactions calling for support (Jule 2008). Significantly, it appears that FLL in particular has fallen out of favor with male students, being primarily pursued by girls. However, it is important to note that this lack of interest in foreign languages is a modern development.

During a time when education was a privilege reserved for upper- and middle-class boys, language learning was a decisively male domain.

Although little knowledge about these boys' attitudes towards language learning exists, it can be assumed that FLL was deemed an "appropriate" male activity due to its importance in the (English) curriculum of the 18th and 19th centuries. When girls were given access to education, which included foreign languages such as French or Italian, boys' engagement with FLL showed no significant change. In fact, this change could only be observed after education became universally accessible across the social classes and FLL was not limited to specific school types or age groups anymore (Carr and Pauwels 2006).

Nowadays, FLL's status as a valuable curriculum option has sharply decreased, a phenomenon which can be observed particularly among male students. While FLL has largely expanded as a field of study both in its accessibility and the number of available target languages, FLL is still primarily perceived as a "luxury" which is unnecessary for the majority of work areas, and therefore often dismissed for more "rewarding" subjects (Carr and Pauwels 2006, 7–8), particularly in our increasingly skill-focused society. According to a study by Carr (2002, 4–9), FLL has a low status among a number of both ambitious and less academically engaged students, who regard languages as either a "hard option" due to its difficulty, or as a "soft option" for its lack of career potential. Importantly, the majority of these students were male (Carr and Pauwels 2006, 42). In fact, statistics show that boys' participation in foreign language courses in English speaking countries significantly decreases from lower levels, which mostly include compulsory FLL study, to the final school years. For instance, the participation rate of boys in the United Kingdom dropped from a 47% at GSCE level to a mere 34% at A level in 2003, when the study of a foreign language was still mandatory up to GSCE level (Carr and Pauwels 2006, 11–12). When given a choice, it appears that the majority of male students discontinue their FLL studies in school.

With regards to academic achievement, boys' supposed underperformance has taken the central stage in the educational politics of many Western countries, particularly in the UK and Australia. For instance, GSCE results report that girls increasingly outperform their male peers (Swann 2005, 632). Furthermore, the National School English Literacy Survey conducted in Australia in 1996 showed that 41% of male students in Year 5 (in contrast to 26% of girls) did not meet the national standards for reading and writing in their L1 (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, 19). The media reactions in both of these countries have been explosive and highly emotional (Swann 2005, 632–633; Carr and Pauwels 2006, 22–23), resulting in the publication of guides for teachers and parents (Swann 2005, 634; Jule 2008, 53) which advertise counter-actions supporting a more "boy-friendly" curriculum.

By appealing to a "male learning style", these narratives represent an essentialist sex-difference approach towards gender. This masculine style is supposedly "more physical, aggressive and competitive" than the current approach towards teaching (Jule 2008, 53). For instance, the British "Can do better" proposes that boys "may find it harder to acquire the more sedentary skills of reading and writing" and "work best when given tightly structured tasks" (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1998, 10), as is the case with mathematics. Evidently, this rhetoric focuses exclusively on a single type of masculinity, and is informed by dominant gender discourses. With this in mind, it is not surprising that the male underachievement narrative is frequently accompanied by anti-feminist men's rights discourses arguing for a "restoration of masculinity" in a "feminized" education culture (Carr and Pauwels 2006, 23).

Furthermore, the authenticity of the "boys' crisis" narrative has been called into question by many scholars. Supposed evidence found in research has been criticized for its lack of intersectionality with other significant variables such as socioeconomic factors, location or ethnicity (Carr and Pauwels 2006). Likewise, it ignores the continuing existence of the "glass ceiling" in employment, with women earning 80% less than their male peers with an equal educational background (Jule 2008, 52). Therefore, boys continue to achieve more later in life, regardless of their school experience. Finally, the essentialist ideas of the boys' crisis narrative are based on and further contribute to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in a similar way to sex difference research, thus sustaining dominant gender discourses.

4. DOMINANT GENDER DISCOURSES AND BOYS' INTEREST IN A "FEMINIZED" FIELD OF STUDY

Both sex-difference research and the narrative of boys' underachievement largely reflect the belief that FLL is a female domain. In fact, this is one of the most wide-spread commonsense beliefs about gender in society. According to supporters of this discourse, particularly the emotional narratives on boys' underachievement described above, language learning is a "feminized" field both concerning teachers and learners. While "feminization" typically refers to a particular field which is mostly pursued by women (Schmenk 2007, 128), thus referring to statistics (e.g. the participation rates described above or the number of female FLL teachers in schools), Schmenk proposes a different approach.

Namely, she claims that numbers represent only one aspect of a larger and much more complex picture and thus looks at the feminization of language learning from a poststructuralist gender studies perspective.

According to Schmenk (2007, 129), "feminizations ought to be viewed as discursively produced genderizations that link images of femininity to particular behaviors, aspects, observations, etc." Therefore, she employs discourse theory in order to explain that the social reality of language learning being a female domain (its "feminization") did not merely occur by chance or because of sociolinguistic reasons theorized in sex difference language research, but instead because it was created in discourse. In fact, arguments in favor of dominant gender discourses (which include both the aforementioned research and the boys' crisis narrative) might actually contribute to the reinforcement of this reality. For instance, sex difference research effectively links stereotypically feminine traits to successful language learning, thus creating a feminized image of FLL and contributes to the creation of discursive knowledge which is perceived as a cultural "truth" (Schmenk 2004, 519). Since these acknowledged "truths" continuously influence the way individuals think and behave, they might directly relate to boys' lack of interest in FLL.

The available subject positions created in gender discourses suggest appropriate behavior for male students, which could influence their interest in FLL. In fact, the feminization of language learning may deny FLL as an appropriate activity for boys. Accordingly, Carr and Pauwels (2006, 28) argue that "one of the most powerful forces impacting upon young people's in-school behaviour continues to be the power of the normative, discursively protected, gendered [...] sense of self". These gendered identities reflect knowledge on how "real" boys should or should not behave, which, again, is regarded as a natural "truth" due to its continuous re-production in discourse. Thus, it has become a widely accepted perception shared by both students and teachers that FLL is an appropriate curriculum choice for girls, and less so for boys (Carr and Pauwels 2006, 42).

Additionally, dominant gender discourses are directly related to the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which distances itself from supposedly feminine activities such as FLL. According to Connell (2005), hegemonic masculinity represents the dominant variety of masculinities which legitimizes men's dominant position over women in society. Furthermore, men who have a claim in hegemonic masculinity must continuously reaffirm their opposition to femininity in order to confirm their sense of masculinity, thus distancing themselves from women and gay men (Johnson 1997). Since FLL in school entails exercises such as "[p]ersonal expression, [...] identification with literary characters, introspection [and] self-narration" (Carr and Pauwels 2006, 40), which are clearly linked to discursively created notions about femininity, it directly opposes expectations of hegemonic masculinity. To illustrate this tension, a boy questioned during a study undertaken in Western Australia high schools

argues: "English is more suited to girls because it's not the way guys think... I hope you aren't offended by this, but most guys who like English are faggots" (Martino 1995, 354). Clearly, he regards language learning as a feminine pastime unsuited for heterosexual males, thus feeling the need to distance himself from it to confirm to hegemonic masculinity. Interestingly, this phenomenon does not occur among exclusively male students. According to another study, boys in same-sex schools in the United Kingdom choose languages more frequently than their peers in mixed-gender schools (Sunderland 2004); arguably, the lack of girls who would otherwise take these courses causes FLL to become a more gender-neutral activity, as the boys do not feel the need to distance themselves from a feminized area of study.

5. CONCLUSION

Consequently, it can be argued that dominant gender discourses, as represented in sex-difference research and the boys' crisis narrative, negatively contribute to boys' interest in FLL. Indeed, these discourses support the stereotypical notion that language learning is a female activity, which discourages male students from pursuing language study in school, particularly if they have a stake in hegemonic masculinity. In fact, their sex difference approach towards gender increases the cultural gap between boys and girls by depicting them as individuals with naturally distinct interests and talents. The ideas that girls are superior at language learning and that boys need be educated in a more "masculine" way are based on dominant gender discourses instead of scientific facts, and further take part in the continuous reproduction of discursively established knowledge. As discourses play a significant role in the identity formation process, they may influence boys' decisions to partake and be interested in FLL. Hence, this paper critically looked at the problems of sex difference research and the current debate on boys' underachievement in FLL from a poststructuralist gender perspective. In order to escape the "vicious cycle" of problematic discourse reinforcement, future academic research and educational measures ought to adopt a similar approach and tackle the issue with all its complexities rather than falling back on binary stereotypes and maintaining the status quo. Based on these results, a follow-up study on the links between boys' FLL interest and their beliefs in stereotypical ideas about gender produced in dominant discourses may be conducted.

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