

A Gender- Based Analysis of Learning English Pronunciation and the Teachers' Awareness about the Students Identities

تحليل قائم على النوع الاجتماعي لتعلم نطق اللغة الإنجليزية ومدى وعي الأساتذة بهويات الطلبة

Author 1 (Babou Amina) - Author 2 (Abdelhay Bakhta)

Author 1 full affiliation Doctorant: Université Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed

Author 2 full affiliation Professeur: Université Abdelhamid Ibn Badis, Mostaganem

E-Mail : aminababou88@yahoo.fr

Laboratory : Etudes de Genre, Langues et Diversités Sociolinguistiques. Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University, Mostaganem-Algeria

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ABSTRACT : A plethora of studies have been conducted to tackle the different variables that believed to be intimately related to pronunciation accuracy. Notwithstanding, very few studies have been raised to scrutinize the role of gender in the area of learning a foreign language. This paper seeks to investigate to what extent gender is entwined with the learners of English as a foreign language (EFL for short), particularly in the area of phonetics, or pronunciation. We tried to study the influence of gender identities in the pronunciation accuracy of Algerian EFL students. Adopting the community of practice perspective as a framework, the findings reveal that the great majority of female students tend to display particular styles via outperforming in the articulation of certain sounds.

Keywords: Accurate pronunciation- Communities of practice- EFL students- EFL teachers- Gender identities.

ملخص : أجريت مجموعة كبيرة من الدراسات لمعالجة المتغيرات المختلفة التي يعتقد أنها ترتبط ارتباطاً وثيقاً بدقة النطق. على الرغم من ذلك ، فقد تم جمع عدد قليل جداً من الدراسات لفحص دور الجنس في مجال تعلم لغة أجنبية. يسعى هذا البحث إلى معرفة إلى أي مدى يتشابك الجندر مع متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL للاختصار) ، وخاصة في مجال الصوتيات ، أو النطق. حاولنا دراسة تأثير الهويات بين الجنسين في دقة النطق لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. باعتماد منظور مجتمع الممارسة كإطار ، تكشف النتائج أن الغالبية العظمى من الطالبات يملن إلى عرض أنماط معينة من خلال الأداء المتفوق في التعبير عن أصوات معينة الكلمات المفتاحية: النطق الدقيق - مجتمعات الممارسة - طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية - معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية - هويات الجنسين .

Résumé: Une pléthore d'études ont été menées pour s'attaquer aux différentes variables supposées être intimement liées à l'exactitude de la prononciation. Néanmoins, très peu d'études ont été réalisées pour examiner le rôle du genre dans l'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère. Cet article cherche à déterminer dans quelle mesure le genre est étroitement lié aux apprenants de l'anglais comme langue étrangère (EFL en abrégé), en particulier dans le domaine de la phonétique ou de la prononciation. Nous avons essayé d'étudier l'influence des identités de genre sur l'exactitude de la prononciation des étudiants algériens EFL. En adoptant la perspective de la communauté de pratique comme cadre théorique, les résultats montrent que la grande majorité des étudiantes ont tendance à afficher des styles particuliers en surperformant l'articulation de certains sons.

Mots-Clés : Prononciation précise - Communautés de pratique - Étudiants EFL - Enseignants EFL - Identités de genre.

1. INTRODUCTION

Without denying the crucial role of the different skills of grammar, vocabulary and writing instructions, we think that pronunciation constitutes the bedrock of teaching/learning English as a foreign language. Pronunciation is a significant aspect of language and it requires special attention for both EFL teachers and students. Teaching of pronunciation is a pivotal factor in foreign language teaching. Unfortunately, one of the main challenges that EFL learners may face in Algeria is the problem of correct word pronunciation and achieving good pronunciation skills. Research into the intimate relation between identity and pronunciation has momentous implications for the arena of applied linguistics. This investigation is devoted to tackle the correlation between EFL students' construction of gender identities and their level of pronunciation accuracy. As I emphasize the

prominence of pronunciation as a pivot for accomplishing communicative competence, I take into account the need to embrace an in-depth understanding on how teachers should readjust their roles inasmuch as learners construct a myriad of gender identities for the negotiation of the self in the classroom as a community of practice. Besides pedagogical expertise, greater awareness of the learning context plays a key role in overcoming language handicaps within the EFL classroom. EFL teachers need to be familiar with the influence of gender identities on the students' linguistic and phonetic choices.

For EFL speakers who strive to learn the English language, the capacity to speak fluently and to achieve pronunciation accuracy is requisite. More interestingly, researchers in this realm and EFL teachers need to be aware about the differences between the two genders in the EFL classroom, particularly in the area of phonetics. Notwithstanding, I should spotlight on the fact that I scrutinize gender identities when learning English as a foreign language rather than considering them as gender differences. Drawing on the community of practice framework (Cofp, for short), I intend to survey how EFL students readjust the meanings of masculinity and femininity, to negotiate their identities, not as a bundle of fixed binary opposition, but as a flexible practice to convey their *status-quo* in the EFL classroom. An insight worth attending to even now is that we should borne in mind that accurate pronunciation does not necessarily entail native-like control of the language, yet it is rather a subcategory of intelligibility. To nuance the picture, the EFL speakers should attempt to make themselves understood not solely by English native speakers, but to non-natives as well.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Identity and Communities of Practice:

For a start, let us point that identity merely means how individuals come to construct themselves, of course with respect to those surrounding cohorts. Gender researchers have recognized, across the social sciences, that gender cannot be assessed as fixed or stable category because this would be generalizing the myriad experiences of women and men. In this line of thought, individuals contribute in various communities of practice and those communities are nested in a host of ways with other communities. Inasmuch as these processes of participation and interaction are continuously changing, members of the community of practice constantly reshape any sort of individual's identity, including gender identity. Wardaugh (2009) claims that individual identity is created in and through several interactions with others, and the change may be tremendous. The analytical framework of the examination draws on Eckert and Mc Connell-Ginet's (1992) paradigm of "communities of practice", gender is constructed through the social practices that people display in the miscellaneous communities in which they are members. Gender is, furthermore, what individuals do, not what they have (Wardaugh, 2009). It is a set of social practices and behaviours emanated from certain ideas about what a particular culture at a particular moment in time reads as "masculine" or "feminine". Thanks to the concept of "community of factice", we gain the opportunity to canvass the individual's co-construction of the identity from the calibration of day to-day social membership and activity of individuals.

2.2. Dimension of the community of practice:

As it has been revealed earlier, the community of practice framework, unlike the aforementioned theories, drew its roots from sociology, psychology, anthropology and women studies. The limelight of this theory was directed to five aspects of analysis, viz. No presupposition of gender differences as a starting point, it stresses the significance of the constructive practices of a group, especially mutual active engagement of attaining a jointly negotiated practice of gender. It shows an emphasis on learning and mutability in gendered linguistic styles displayed across groups ; the community of practice perspective evinces that the intra-group variation should be interpreted as natural, and the crux of this theory is that the social construction of gender is local and cross

culturally variable. In other words, argumentation and evidence of this theory was usually offered by canvassing activities and interactions, not differences.

Of course, the communities of practice are not produced out of a thin air; Wenger (1991) defines the CofP as one of the central insights which calls for a shared expertise. The emergence of communities of practice arouses from the shared expertise, specific ardency and position, which form the bedrock of the participation of the group of individuals in the world and catalyze those members to negotiate meaning via shared practice.

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), we are members of communities of practice. Needless to say, communities of practice are omnipresent. The substantial overlap of teachers in the department of Biological and Agricultural studies, for instance, takes place because the teachers partake the same interests.

In an attempt to duly preserve and maintain the interests of the department and strive to engross in a variety of practices that tend to bring their academic roles to fruition, they should, according to Wenger (1991), sustain mutual relationships; either harmonious or conflictual. It is not necessarily to manifest a permanent concurrence. Put differently, albeit they may face disagreement, the be-all and end-all of those teachers is to be personally involved or implicated into how they would create a set of strategies to deal with the potential obstacles that may plague the prominent task of those teachers.

Similarly, radio journalists can symbolize one kind of the communities of practice. The members of this community tend to weld their formal academic backgrounds with their talents and viewpoints aiming at putting it into practice. By so doing, they attempt to keep themselves in tune with their audiences and improve the services and programmers. It is true that the entire world is saturated with different sorts of communities of practice. Yet, it is not usually, according to Wenger (1998), possible to call everything a community of practice. We and the cohort of our neighbours may constitute what is known as a "community", but it is not always a community of practice. (Abdelhay, 2008: 117).

3. The pilot study:

The participants in this scrutiny are from four groups of second year (LMD) students and four English teachers of phonetics from the university of Hassiba Benbouali (in Algeria). I prefer to claim that the informants are from four EFL communities of practice, deeming the EFL classroom as a Cofp. The total number of the students is 142, 84 females and 58 males. Their accuracy was assessed through reading aloud, direct interviews, recorded oral tests from seven lectures of phonetics and reading modules, interviewing and questioning later to check and elaborate our observation. So, I triangulate the crux of this examination to grapple with the full range of issues concerning the reciprocate influence of gender identities of EFL students and their accuracy of English pronunciation.

Prior to embarking upon the questionnaire phase, we opt for elucidating to our students the overall gist of this examination and, withal, elaborating the meaning of gender identities, which was unobtrusive for them at the beginning.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

. Results and discussion:

The analytical framework of the examination draws on Eckert and Mc Connell-Ginet's (1992) paradigm of "communities of practice", gender is constructed through the social practices that people display in the miscellaneous communities in which they are members. Gender is, furthermore, what individuals' do, not what they have (Wardaugh, 2009). It is a bundle of social practices and behaviours emanated from certain ideas about what a particular culture at a particular moment in time reads as "masculine" or "feminine". Thanks to the concept of "community of

factice", we gain the opportunity to canvass the EFL students' co-construction of the identity from the calibration of day to-day social membership and activity within their classrooms in the department of English. Along this line of thought, Wenger (1998) defines identity as spatio-temporal, which means that identity is constantly constructing in a social context and through time.

In her study of a nerd identity, Bucholtz (1999) elucidates the construction of a nerd identity in the students that she dissected. In her scrutiny, she finds that the students' identification as nerds has to infiltrate a process of negotiating their identity via a complex and dynamic set of activities and practices. Adopting the community of practice perspective as a framework to analyse gender identities in EFL classrooms, the findings report that the great majority of female students tend to access the *ne plus ultra* of other students (particularly their male counterparts), via outperforming in the articulation of certain sounds. In an endeavour to negotiate the nerd identity, 53.12% of female students adopt the intelligibility and the mastery of the phonological characteristics of sounds such as: /ə/ /3:/ /a:/, dark /l/, the glottal stop and especially the diphthong /əʊ/, as a *suis generis* of their identity, to demarcate themselves, not solely *vis-à-vis* other male counterparts, but *vis-à-vis* other females as well. Albeit we cannot confirm a total superiority of females in English pronunciation accuracy, the results reveal that the quality of the schwa /ə/ does not usually present difficulties to female students. By way of contrast, 93.66% of males substitute the accurate pronunciation of the /ə/ by the French (i, a, o) in the words (possible, woman and oblige), respectively. Female students, at the Algerian university under study, blatantly prefer to reinforce /p, t, k/ by the glottal closure, i.e. the glottal stop which, *de facto*, precedes them. A host of male students articulate words such as cream and road with the Arabic rolled /r/, which by nature requires a back articulation. Without a rapt attention, you can notice that in female students' pronunciation of the above words, the tongue is raised and directed towards the post alveolar region area with some tilt backwards.

Moreover, the difference between males' and females' students in the realisation of dark /l/ is glaringly conspicuous. In words such as milk, muddle and feel, the /l/ sound is articulated, by 64.28% female students and only 8.62% of males, with the velum being in its raised position, closing off the nasal resonator, the glade of the tongue is in contact with the upper teeth ridge (Cruttenden, 2001), allowing the air to escape on both sides.

Not less interestingly, 29.76% of EFL female students tend to enact two types of femininity, 'traditional femininity' and 'empowered femininity' separately and together. By traditional femininity, it is meant to be the stereotypical traits that delineate women as underrepresented and co-opted. For empowered femininity, I prefer to refer to the negotiation of different meanings by females, and how they invoke a dominant identity, through participation and practice in the EFL community of practice. By this token, this group of female students sometimes adopt the low pitch, which is peculiar to males according to the social norms, to secure respect and negotiate linguistic empowerment when reading texts which revolve around 'Violence against Women', 'The Arab Spring', and 'Challenges for EFL learners'. The switches of voice quality are the incarnation of how masculinity and femininity are stylistically constructed in a community of practice. (Abdelhay, 2008)

As for the questionnaire, the following tables will elucidate the main findings concerning EFL students' attitudes towards their accuracy of English pronunciation and their identities, from gender perspectives.

Questions	Yes	No
1. Is it important to you as an EFL student to pronounce English in a good way?	34.48%	65.52%
2. Is your English pronunciation good?	34.48%	65.52%
3. Do you speak English in the class only when it is necessary?	27.58%	72.42%
4. Does it matter to you how your classmates perceive your pronunciation?	27.58%	72.42%
5. Do you feel that your gender identity affects your pronunciation of English?	17.24%	82.76%
6. Do female students outperform in their pronunciation more than their male counterparts?	68.96%	31.04%
7. Do you feel that you need to resist your L1 to ensure the validation in the EFL culture?	86.20%	13.8%
8. Do teachers pay more attention to female students' in the class?	89.66%	10.34%

Table 1: Male students' Attitudes towards their English pronunciation.

The gist of the questionnaire is to explore how the learners' gender ideologies and stereotypes influence their motivation or resistance to the foreign language learning, which eventually affect their success, particularly in the area of pronunciation. The low level of males' pronunciation accuracy may be interpreted as the echo of the resistance to the transformation of learners' gender identities.

Questions	Yes	No
1. Is it important to you as an EFL student to pronounce English in a good way?	83.33%	16.67%
2. Is your English pronunciation good?	66.66%	33.34%
3. Do you speak English in the class only when it is necessary?	60.71%	39.29%
4. Does it matter to you how your classmates perceive your pronunciation?	83.33%	16.67%
5. Do you feel that your gender identity affects your pronunciation of English?	66.66%	33.34%
6. Do female students outperform in their pronunciation more than their male counterparts?	92.85%	7.15%
7. Do you feel that you need to resist your L1 to ensure the validation in the EFL culture?	83.33%	16.67%
8. Do teachers pay more attention to female students' in the class?	83.33%	16.67%

Table 2: Female students' Attitudes towards their English pronunciation.

This study elucidates the fact that EFL female students are very much in favour of modernity and openness to western values, in comparison to their male counterparts. The attempt to native-like pronunciation of English is *per se* a language of empowerment, a possibility that may not be obtainable when they speak Arabic.

As expected, the findings endorse the claim of Shardakova & Pavlenko (2004) which reads that EFL learners exhibit a specific identity struggle when speaking English. Along this line of thought, Bashir-Ali (2006) sustains that some EFL learners feel the need to eschew and deny their L1 cultures to assimilate in the mainstream of English academic discourse. In support of this, Sunderland (1996) demonstrates that patriarchal values will be brought into the classroom by students and teachers via gendered practices and identities. By way of explanation, some of the EFL male students report that 'although we study English, we are Algerians'.

Surprisingly, a host of the EFL students in this investigation do not corroborate the view of Sunderland (1994), in which she reveals that teachers give more attention to boys than girls, albeit this kind of behaviour is not without fail favouring students, but rather 'responding to them actively' (p. 137).

4. CONCLUSION

The research findings offer an insight into why males and females respond unevenly in the EFL classroom. EFL teachers need to be familiar with the influence of gender identities on the students' linguistic and phonetic choices. This investigation may help EFL teachers understand how their students readjust the meanings of masculinity and femininity, to negotiate their identities, not as a set of fixed binary opposition, but as a malleable practice to convey their *status-quo* in the EFL classroom. The learner-centred curriculum is, therefore, of paramount importance in EFL teaching.

In an endeavour to reconcile my modest gender and education background, I tremendously believe that EFL teachers are the mediator between EFL community of practice and the communities of practice whose language students learn. One way to boost teachers' awareness is by incorporating issues of gender identities and EFL learning in teacher educational programs.

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