

A Review

Gender and English Language Learners

Norton, B. & Pavlenko, A. (Eds.), Virginia: TESOL Inc., 2004. Pp. Viii + 200.

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Abstract

This is a review of the book named *Gender and English Language Learners*, edited by Bonny Norton and Aneta Pavlenko, and published by TESOL Inc. in 2004.

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“*Gender and English Language Learners*” is an anthology of mutually independent research papers compiled by Bonny Norton and Aneta Pavlenko, constituting one of the Case Studies in TESOL Practice Series. As indicated by its series title, most of the research projects dealt with in this volume are qualitative in nature, though some of them applied quantitative approaches as well. All the studies recognize local issues that are problematized theoretically, primarily in feminist perspectives. In this review, I will introduce principal features of each study piece briefly, and then discuss the advantages and difficulties that this type of research often bears.

1. INDIVIDUAL STUDIES

The first chapter, written by Norton and Pavlenko, the editors, is their position statement. They declare that the gender as a learner variability (Ellis, 1994) is not an issue here. That is to say, this book is not intended to answer questions such as “Which are the better language learners, men or women?” Instead, the overarching inquiry is how English teachers can help second language learners recognize the gender inequity overtly and covertly prevailing in our language use, and hopefully gain voice to resist it.

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The rest of this book is divided into four parts: *Teaching for Change*, *Student Voices*, *Innovations for All*, and *Insights from Japan*. I will discuss them in due order.

Part 1: *Teaching for Change*. First, Nelson describes a teacher's endeavor to adopt a gender issue, more precisely homosexuality, in her English grammar class at an American community college. The researcher observed and transcribed the class and interviewed the teacher to probe her intentions and reflections. The second study takes up a more quantitative approach. Boxer and Tyler investigated the international teaching assistants (ITAs) on US campuses on the perception of sexual harassment. They found not only that ITAs showed a different perception of sexual harassment from that of American students, but also that it is possible that they might have interpreted the classroom behavior guidelines provided by their university in unintended ways, because of their social, cultural and historical background.

The writing center at an American college is the study site in Chapter 4. Jordan administered a written survey to 10 ESL students and 4 staff members at the writing center. According to Jordan, the international students claimed that they could ask the staff questions about writing assignments that seemed to them too basic to ask their professors. He speculates that this is because writing center staff have less authority than professors, and the students felt more liberated.

Part 2: *Student Voices*. The first study by Govindasamy and Khemlani David investigates the male students' voices in a female-dominant ESL class in Malaysia. Extensive interviews exposed a big difference in goal orientation between male and female students. Male students did not care about their performance in classes that they thought insignificant for their future, and it is in such classes where women outperformed men.

In Chapter 6, Julé conducted an ethnographic study on a 7 year-old Canadian immigrant girl from Punjab. In the ESL classroom that Julé observed for 10 months, Amandeep, the girl, uttered literally no words. According to Julé, this is because the ESL teacher unconsciously treated her, and other girls as well, in a way that limited her participation in class.

Part 3: *Innovations for All*. In chapter 7, Parry reports a grass-roots endeavor to raise the literacy level of the local population, especially women after preliminary education, through a community library project in poverty-stricken rural Uganda. Parry found that the library did encourage the women to read, mainly in English because the books written in their native language were few, but that the content of their reading was mostly limited to themes dealing with traditional women's roles.

In Chapter 8, Taylor conducted a study on the ESL Antidiscrimination Leadership Program 2000 offered to young students from two high schools in Canada. The camp programs and the participants were described in detail. Taylor maintains that English language educators are responsible for providing the learners with opportunities to share their experiences and equipping them with critical insights toward the status quo.

Chapter 9 is about a technology course offered in a MATESL program in the United States. The researchers, Rilling and Biles, attempted various ITs to maximize the students' involvement in class. Analyzing online discussion transcripts was strongly recommended as a useful pedagogical tool, because it let the students, and the instructor, reflect on their own language use. The female students found that they actually used so-called Women's Language, characterized by hedges, polite forms, etc.

Part 4: *Insights from Japan*. First, Simon-Maeda describes her experiences in the gender and language

issues course she taught at a two-year college in Japan. She utilized a list of sexist words both from English and Japanese, showed videos, and invited guest speakers, to let her students recognize gender issues. The students were asked to keep their journals as a place to express their opinions. The journals clearly show that the students' awareness was surely raised by the course.

Chapter 11 by Saft and Ohara might provide teachers in similar situations with practical ideas to teach gender issues in a required English course at a Japanese university. One of the researchers, Saft, was the instructor of the course and was pre-cautioned by the administration that he should not use the whole course time to cover only one topic. Therefore, the researchers had to come up with a compromised plan; they created a 4-day module on gender.

The last chapter is about Cohen's endeavor to integrate linguistics with feminist pedagogy. The relatively advanced level sophomores in her course were given a list of reading related to social inequity. They watched a news excerpt and transliterated it to recognize how unconsciously they gave a male commentator more credit than his female counterpart. They coined words based on a list of affixes and then created stories to contextually define the new words. The final comments on the course from the students showed that they learned a lot about critical thinking from the course.

2. PROBLEMS

What "Gender and English Language Learners" describes is the diversity and complexity of English learners' life that every teacher has to face in this modern society. Many teachers will find they easily identify with the teachers-contributors in this book, which offers pedagogical insights. From at least two viewpoints, however, this book exhibits flaws.

(1) Methodological frailty

First, some of the studies introduced here are methodologically questionable. Although Stake (2000) declared, "Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied" (p. 435), he also emphasized the importance of *triangulation* in qualitative case studies. Since qualitative research does not utilize statistics, which produce the same results when given the same data, presumably regardless of who the researcher is or what s/he believes ideologically, the trustworthiness of a qualitative study strongly depends on its methodological rigor. In other words, multiple, sometimes overlapping and repetitive approaches should be taken to avoid misinterpretation of a particular case. Some studies in this volume however lack this triangulation.

For example, in the study by Jordan (Chapter 4) on ITAs, what she did was to distribute a 2-page written survey to ESL Students and the writing center staff, and to collect responses only from 10 students and 4 staff members. Even though Jordan claims that she was also a staff member, she fails to mention other methods she could have taken, such as keeping her own research journal, having students keep their reflective journals, multiple observations in other members' sessions, or direct interviews. Consequently, her findings and suggestions do not sound as convincing as Jordan probably hoped.

Another example is Simon-Maeda's study on Japanese two-year college students (Chapter 10). She elaborates her classroom procedures to teach the issues, but fails to describe her research methods. Has she audio-taped or videotaped the classroom activities, transcribed the raw data, and conducted discourse

analyses? Or did she just informally observe the class as the teacher and write this research paper based on the students' in-class journals? Simon-Maeda's research is insightful as action research but weak as a qualitative study.

This methodological frailty makes the findings seem not only ideologically one-sided, but too "preset". It was hard to eradicate the suspicion that the researcher saw only what s/he wanted to see. A predictable research finding in itself is not a bad thing, as seen in many quantitative social science studies that have been conducted to reject null-hypotheses in order to endorse phenomena that have been treated as empirical knowledge. However, in qualitative study, the researcher him/herself is the research instrument. Without a detailed description of the multiple procedures s/he has followed in order to be open to other possible interpretations, besides than his/her original beliefs, the significance of the study is disputable.

(2) Cultural determinism and emancipation

Secondly, some studies do not seem to be exempt from a pitfall of a certain epistemological framework that Pennycook (2001) called "emancipatory modernism." Even though Pennycook approves the value of the framework in comparison with "liberal ostrichism," which takes the stance that applied linguistics is only indirectly related to other social problems, he points out its likely deficits. One is the deterministic social vision and the other is the belief that "awareness of textually encoded ideologies can lead to emancipation" (p. 167).

First, the views of Japanese culture prevalent in Chapter 4 appeared, to me, to be too deterministic. For example, in the conclusion section of Chapter 10, Simon-Maeda writes with no citation from previous literature, "Although all women in Japan face challenging situations in their school, work, and home situations, most junior college female learners are marginalized because of the devalued status of their educational background" (p. 139). This statement has two difficulties. One is the statement's validity, as a matter of course. The other is the stereotypical view about Japanese society and culture, which is common among studies on Japan, as Kubota (1999) points out. The dichotomies between West and Non-West and liberal and traditional/conservative/even feudalistic are repeated here.

The next problem is that many of the researchers/contributors appear to believe that they can change the society simply by raising people's awareness of a certain problem, in this case, gender issues. This seems to be the reason why the researchers tended to concentrate on describing what was done in one situation, rather than paying sufficient attention to in what way and to what degree the learners' lives changed after a project was conducted.

For example, did Julé in Chapter 6 talk to the ESL teacher, to whom she attributed most of the cause of the Punjabi girl's sustained silence in class? Did the teacher change the way she taught? Did Amandeep, the Punjabi girl, start to speak up in class at last? Was she happier with the change of the teacher's attitude? We do not know. Or did the ESL students in the grammar class presented in Chapter 2 succeed in acquiring impartial views toward gay and lesbian people? We don't know. Or did the Japanese university students who became more sensitive to and critical about gender inequality in Chapter 11 actually do something that other students would not do to change the society? More fundamentally, were the students really enlightened by the lecture, as Saft and Ohara claim? They might have critically thought about gender issues before and only been given language to express their

opinions in the course. Without follow-up, multiple and engaged interviews or observations over a prolonged time period, it is impossible to know whether the teachers/researchers' well-intentioned endeavor really lead to the emancipation of the learners.

3. CONCLUSION

Even though I have been critical of this book, I found the message of the book encouraging. As a teacher who teaches a compulsory EFL course to Japanese college students, I often become exhausted by constantly having to tell my students to stay awake or to stop looking at cell phones in class. Quite a few students have long lost their interest in studying English, and I have few reasons to persuade them otherwise. Once in a while, I can't help feeling totally powerless as a teacher. The teachers/researchers in this book, on the other hand, believe that they can change an unjust society and practically put their belief into everyday teaching. Teachers who have had somewhat similar feelings to mine would be inspired by the book and reminded that our job can be difficult but is critical for a better future. Because of the possibility that this book could have been more empowering to teachers, it is even more regrettable that it did not include sufficient follow-up studies covering students' voices after the implementation of the educational attempts.

To sum up, "Gender and English Language Learners" is a great reference with practical ideas and tips for teachers who already have determined to include gender issues in their English teaching. For those who have not decided whether gender is "the" imminent issue that should be dealt with in English classes, however, in comparison with the issue of race for instance, the reasoning and justification that almost all the contributors allocated relatively large space to in their papers is not convincing enough. To avoid what Pennycook (2001) called "hypocritical denial of academic responsibility" (p. 170), I should simply state that a list of additional reading is necessary to understand the relevance of gender issues in English teaching/learning.

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