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GENDER, CODE-SWITCHING, AND CLASSROOM VOICE: RETHINKING ASSESSMENT IN MULTILINGUAL EFL CLASSROOMS

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https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23107933

Annotation. This thesis explores how gender and the use of more than one language affect speaking in an EFL classroom. It is based on a one-term study of 8th-grade students at a specialized school in Urgench, Uzbekistan. Girls did better than boys in writing and grammar, but they spoke less in oral discussion, especially girls from rural areas. Bilingual students often switched between Uzbek and Russian, which shows their language skill rather than confusion. The thesis suggests that common speaking assessments may undervalue these students, and it proposes gender-balanced grouping and assessment that gives credit for using several languages.

Keywords: gender; code-switching; translanguaging; EFL assessment; classroom voice; multilingual learners

1. Introduction

In many English classes, speaking a lot is treated as a sign of knowing a lot. The student who talks confidently is seen as strong, and the quiet student is seen as weak. But this idea is not always true. Gender and language background can change how, and whether, students show what they know.

This thesis is based on a one-term study of 8th-grade EFL learners at a specialized school in Urgench, Uzbekistan. It looks at two patterns seen in the class: differences in speaking between girls and boys, and code-switching between Uzbek and Russian. It also asks how these patterns should change the way teachers assess speaking.

2. Main Part

Gender and participation

Girls in the class did better than boys in writing and grammar on regular tests. However, they spoke much less in discussions and debates. The gap was bigger among girls from rural areas. Girls from Urgench city were more independent and more confident when speaking. Boys, in contrast, joined in freely and asked questions even when they were not sure of the answer, so their willingness to speak did not depend on being correct.

These observations are in line with research showing that social expectations about gender shape how teenagers communicate (Schilling, 2011; Eckert, 2003). Cameron (2005) also discusses how women's speech is often judged in a way that reduces their perceived authority to speak. Norton (2013) adds that a learner's voice in class is connected to their identity and to how much they feel their words are accepted by others.

Code-switching

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The second pattern was code-switching. Bilingual students often changed between Uzbek and Russian in the middle of a sentence, especially when talking about home and family. For many of them, Russian was the language used at home, while the classroom used mainly Uzbek and English. This should not be seen as confusion or weak language knowledge. It is better understood as a sign of multilingual skill and of how students express their identity (Deumert, 2011). Recent studies on translanguaging support this view. They show that allowing learners to use all of their languages can help understanding and confidence (García & Wei, 2014; Wang & Shen, 2024).

When the two patterns meet

The two patterns also affect each other. Bilingual girls from rural areas were the quietest group in the class. They faced gender-related hesitation and, in addition, felt self-conscious about moving between languages in front of classmates. This shows that classroom voice cannot be explained by gender or by language background alone. It comes from several social positions that one student can hold at the same time.

Effects on assessment and possible solutions

These findings point to a problem with common assessment. If a rubric rewards only confident, uninterrupted speech in one "correct" language, it may give lower marks to students who actually have good communication skills. A quiet girl with excellent grammar and a bilingual student who code-switches may both lose points, even though both show real command of English. Over time this can discourage the very learners who have a lot to offer.

Two solutions are suggested. First, teachers can use gender-balanced groups in speaking tasks. This shares speaking time more fairly and gives quieter students a safe place to talk. Pair work and small-group tasks may work better than whole-class debate, especially at the beginning. Second, rubrics can be based on translanguaging. They should give credit when a student successfully shares an idea, and only then note which languages were used.

3. Conclusion

Gender differences in speaking and code-switching should be treated as useful information about the classroom, not as problems to fix. Seeing them this way leads to fairer and more accurate assessment of what multilingual learners really know.

This study was small and limited to one class. Future research with a larger and more balanced sample, and with interviews about how students see their own voice in class, would help confirm and extend these findings.

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