# The Role of Gender in L2 Interaction: Socialization via L2 Materials

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**Abstract**

Given the importance placed on student-student interaction in today's second language (L2) classroom, this article seeks to examine target language interaction models presented to L2 students. Specifically, this investigation reviews how male and female interaction styles are presented to L2 learners in target language scripts such as textbook and workbook dialogues and audio segments in order to determine whether or not pedagogical materials reinforce stereotypical gender-typed interaction styles.

**Résumé**

Etant donné l'importance de l'interaction orale dans les cours de langue étrangère de nos jours, cet article veut examiner les modèles d'interaction présentés aux élèves dans les texts, surtout les dialogues homme-femme et le style employé par et entre les deux sexes.

## Introduction

Promoting student–student interaction is a goal of many educators in most disciplines. In the 1960s, for example, an "oracy" movement championed the educational value of interaction in all classrooms. Drawing analogies to literacy, Wilkinson (1965) felt that oracy (or interaction) was "a condition of learning in all subjects" (58). For the foreign language educator, however, interaction has only recently (post 1980s) received serious attention. In fact, for decades interaction was considered "little more than a reinforcement activity; an opportunity for students to strengthen their recall of grammar rules and vocabulary lists" (Gascoigne, 2003:1). Fortunately, in our post-communicative world, the productive use of language is now being viewed as an enactment of mental processes, as well as an occasion for learning (Swain and Lapkin, 1998). For Gass and Varonis (1986), for example,

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interaction plays a central role in language acquisition by providing learners with "a forum for testing out hypothesis about the target language" (318). Similarly, Oliver (1998) believes that interaction is beneficial because,

> It provides learners with the opportunity to obtain comprehensible input that is uniquely modified for learners' individual circumstances. It also allows them to modify their own contributions to a conversation in order to make themselves understood. (373)

Given the force of our profession's shift toward learner output and interaction in the classroom from a traditional teacher-dominated model (Gascoigne, 2003; Gass, Mackey, and Pica, 1989; Long, 1995; Platt and Brooks, 1994; Polio and Gass, 1998), the implications of this move must be examined. One important facet of the increased attention to classroom interaction is the role of gender in the interaction process. Indeed, within first-language (L1) interaction studies, important gender-specific styles have been well-documented (Bacon and Finnemann,1992; Cameron, McAlinden, and O'Leary, 1989; Coates,1989; Mulac, Wieman, Widenmann, and Gibson, 1998; Swann, 1998).

To a much lesser extent, the effect of gender on L2 interaction has also been examined (Gascoigne, 2003; Gass and Varonis, 1986; Pica et al., 1991), yet is in need of further attention, "this is an area that has heretofore been neglected among L2 acquisition researchers" (Gass and Varonis, 1986:326). The following investigation seeks to extend this line of inquiry to the pedagogical materials used in today's classroom. Specifically, it will review how male and female interaction styles are presented to L2 learners in target-language scripts such as textbook and workbook dialogues, and audio segments. The driving question is: Do L2 pedagogical materials mirror stereotypical male and female interaction (L1 and L2) styles? In other words, do L2 materials perpetuate and reinforce the "unequal partnership" (Gass and Varonis, 1986:349) that often exists in interaction situations?

## Gender Styles

A great deal of linguistic and sociolinguistic research has focused on the effect of gender in L1 interaction, most of which has been conducted in English. Among the manifold and recurring gender-specific interaction styles, we find that males tend to use linguistic devices such as interruptions, directives, and sentence-initial

conjunctions. Females tend to rely more heavily upon questions, justifiers, intensive adverbs, personal pronouns and word-initial adverbs (Aries, 1967; Mulac et al., 1998; Taps and Yancy-Martin, 1998). In a 1998 mixed-gender dyad study, Mulac et al. found that

> Men used more of what might be considered a direct or overt control tactic, the use of interruptions (*Let's go on to the next topic and see*). Consistent with this analysis, their discourse also displayed a greater use of directives (*Why don't you write down our answers?*) And men maintained the floor through more frequent use of conjunction/fillers to begin a sentence. In contrast, women made greater use of what appears to be indirect control strategy questions (*What's next?*). In addition, they also made greater use of justifiers, apparently sensing a need to provide a rationale for their statements. (Mulac et al. 330)

When in mixed-gender groups, Swann (1989) found that in contrast to the "stereotype of the over-talkative women. . . it is men who dominate the talk. . . men have been found to use more interruptions. . . and simply to talk more than women" (123). For Janet Holmes (1995), men use interaction as a means of gaining and exchanging information, whereas women use it as a way to connect to others.

Females, it would appear, disagree less often—or at least soften their oppositions more than males. Females also tend to use more hedges, or words and phrases designed to reduce the force of an utterance, such as "a bit" or the tag "didn't you?" Not surprisingly, given the cooperative nature of female language, Johnson (1997) found that in cross-sex conversations women fared "poorly in comparison with men in terms of turn taking, interruption, and holding the floor" (9). In fact, the cooperative nature of typical female speech is so well documented that it has been christened "polyphonic" (Coates, 1989:109), reflecting collaboration and the common use of minimal responses ("yes," "humm," "right") that serve to signal the female's supportive role in the dialogue. Men, on the other hand, tend to rely on a hierarchical one-at-a-time mode of interaction at times permitting monologues, or turns at "playing the expert" (Coates, 1989:109). Other typical female characteristics include "hesitations, intensifiers, qualifiers, tag questions, and rising intonation in declaratives (Cameron, McAlinden, and O'Leary, 1989:75).

Although drastically fewer in number, studies examining the effect of gender in L2 interaction (Gascoigne, 2003; Gass and Varonis, 1986; Pica et al., 1991) are noting similarities between L1 gender styles and those in an L2. Gascoigne, for example, sought to determine whether or not gender-specific interaction styles could be detected among English-speaking students communicating in their L2

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(French), and how any detected trends correlated with those already found in L1 studies. Audiorecording the interaction of 20 third-semester post-secondary students divided into male-male, male-female, female-female dyads over a six-week period, she concluded that

> there may be diverging male and female L2 interaction styles and that in many respects the L2 styles mirror those identified in the L1 research: females tend to use more hesitant or mitigating speech, females employ more minimal responses to signal their participation in a co-constructed dialogue, and males produce more conversation leads. (2003:14)

The males also produced more words and turns in the mixed dyads, as also evidenced in the L1 research.


## Socialization Patterns

Since the 1970s, there has been increasing concern expressed regarding "the role of the formal education system in reproducing gender differences and inequalities" (Swann and Graddol, 1995: 135). Studies of L1 classroom interaction have long shown that boys tend to dominate classroom interaction and that educators, at times, reinforce this type of behavior by giving additional time and attention to males (Aries, 1967; Cameron, McAlinden, and O'Leary, 1989; Holmes, 1995; Sadker and Sadker, 1995; Swann and Graddol, 1995). Our educational environment "seems to favor boys, at least in the sense that those who do most of the talking and are able to get their views across tend to be boys" (Swann and Graddol, 1995:136). Because most language students and teachers believe that progress is made by using the target language as much and in as authentic contexts as possible, L2 learners have additional reason to believe that their progress depends to a considerable extent on access to the floor, interaction, and the teacher's attention (Holmes). Therefore, it is "females who lost out. Their polite ways of participating in classroom talk means they are disadvantaged in mixed-sex classrooms" (1995:203).

For Davies (1989), masculinity and femininity are structural properties of our society, not necessarily of the individuals. Therefore, our social environments--particularly educational contexts--condition and reinforce gender-specific discursive patterns. Indeed, everyday discourse forces individuals into a

> dualistic maleness or femaleness that is quite incompatible with principles of equity and yet is not recognized by the speakers as doing so. Images, metaphors, narrative

structures, terms of address, teaching practices, can all function to position girls as marginal within educational discourse. (238)

Similarly, Gemmill and Zoch Schaible (1991) believe that our culture pushes individuals both covertly and overtly into their "appropriate" gender roles and that the role sets are so embedded that they may be easily extended to new contexts such as small group and L2 interaction.

## Materials Review

What do target language pedagogical materials communicate to the language student in terms of gender roles during L2 interaction? To answer this question, the following pages review target-language interaction as it is presented in five popular first-year post-secondary French textbooks all issued between 1999 and 2002[1]. Scores were recorded using interaction measures designed by Gass and Varonis (1986). Interaction was therefore quantified by amount of talk (number of words), number of turns, leading, overlap, as well as the amount of softening/mitigating devices (hesitations, qualifiers, tag-questions), minimal responses (back-channel speech) and monologues (greater than 50 uninterrupted words) used by gender per dialogue.

It was expected that L2 pedagogical materials would reflect and therefore reinforce dominant gender-specific patterns in that males would produce more words, take more turns, lead more exchanges, produce more overlap (talk over their partners) and engage in more monologues (extended uninterrupted discourse) than females. It was also expected that females would produce more minimal responses ("yes," "true," "I see") and mitigating/softening speech ("I think," "maybe") than males.

Of the five textbook programs selected, one chapter (the median chapter) was targeted for detailed review. All dialogues involving either one male and one female, two males, or two females appearing in the target chapter textbook, workbook, and ancillary oral material (student or lab CD) were reviewed. A total of twenty-four dialogues involving two speakers were identified in the target chapters. Of the twenty-four dialogues, six were from male-male dyads, six from female-

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[1] To keep the focus on the trends rather that the texts, individual textbook programs are not named. This information may be requested from the author.

female dyads, and twelve from mixed gender dyads. Averaged findings by dyad and gender are presented in Tables 1 and 2 below.

### Table 1

Average Interaction Scores by Gender in Mixed (Male-Female) Dyads

| | Mixed Pairs | |
|---|---|---|
| | Male | Female |
| Number of Words | 89.3 | 77.6 |
| Number of Turns | 6.75 | 6.9 |
| Conversation Leads | .58 | .41 |
| Overlaps | .16 | 0 |
| Monologues | 0 | 0 |
| Minimal Responses | .16 | .41 |
| Mitigating Devices | 0 | 0 |

### Table 2

Average Interaction Scores by Gender in Same-Sex Dyads

| | $Male^1$-$Male^2$ | | $Female^1$-$Female^2$ | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of Words | 34.25 | 29.25 | 72 | 84.25 |
| Number of Turns | 2.5 | 2.25 | .7 | .7 |
| Conversation Leads | .5 | .5 | .5 | .5 |
| Overlaps | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Monologues | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Minimal Responses | 0 | 0 | .5 | .5 |
| Mitigating Devices | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

### Findings

Perhaps the most surprising finding was the lack or near lack of certain linguistic elements for either of the genders in any of the pairings. For example, there were no examples of mitigating devices or marked hesitant language. There were, with one exception, no overlaps or cases where one interlocutor interrupted or spoke over their partner. There were no monologues and very few minimal responses (« oui, » « Ah oui »).

As for the mixed dyads, although there were subtle differences (males produced more words and leads than females; females took more turns and produced more

minimal responses) none reached significance (p≤.05). The only difference reaching significance was that for the number of words uttered between male-male and female-female dyads, with the all-female dialogues being significantly longer than the all-male dialogues. However, even between same-gender pairs (male-male versus female-female), differences for all other measures (turns, leads, overlaps, monologues, minimal responses, and mitigating devices) were either nonexistant or negligible. Contrary to initial expectations, the dialogues examined here do not reflect traditional male and female speaking styles.

In the mixed dyads males did speak more than females, but the difference was negilgible. However, when comparing same gender dyads (male-male versus female-female) the females spoke significantly more than the males. Across all dyad types the females produced more minimal responses than males (as expected), but again these differences were insignificant. Males did produce more overlaps (n = 1) than the females; however with only one occurence of an overlap in the entire set, few if any conclusions can be drawn.

Perhaps the most interesting finding coming from the dialogue analysis lies not so much in gender differences, but rather in the discrepancies between the artifical language of the dialogue and that of authentic natural discourse. The complete lack of monologues, hestitations, or mitigating devices; the near lack of overlaps and minimal responses (regardless of the gender of the speaker) is not representative of natural discourse. Indeed, authentic, as opposed to pedagogicaly-prepared, speech is rarely without hesitations, fillers, and flaws. Native speakers of every language wrestle with false-starts, hesitations, and word searches. For Brown (1994), everyone

> makes mistakes in both native and second language situations. Native speakers are normally capable of recognizing and correcting such lapses or mistakes, which are not the result of a deficiency in competence but the result of some sort of imperfection or breakdown in the process of producing speech. These hesitations, slips of the tongue, random ungramaticalities, and other performance lapses in native speaker production also occur in second language speech. (165)

Production mistakes or slips are not necessarily bad. In fact they can facilitate comprehension by providing natural repetition and pauses that afford the interlocutor additional time to make sense of incoming information. The artificially-created dialogues examined in this review, however, were stripped of such linguistic hesitancies, along with gender traces.

## Conclusion

If pedagogical environments can condition and reinforce gender-specific discursive patterns (Davies, 1989), then all educators, including foreign language teachers, must be careful of the potentially marginalizing messages we send to our students. The goal of this inquiry was not to prove or disprove a correlation between pedagogical materials and resulting student interaction, but rather to examine whether or not materials typically presented to students of French tend to employ gender-typed language. Indeed, it appears that many textbook authors have made an effort to avoid a stereotyped language in their pedagogical dialogues. As encouraging as this is, it is also clear that these gender-cleansed exchanges are lacking other authentic discursive elements. Therefore, textbook authors may want to consider infusing dialogues with natural discursive elements while maintaining the gender-neutrality they have thus far successfully achieved.

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