Gender Effects on Beginning Discussions
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ABSTRACT

In this paper I describe my observations about starting discussions during a semester teaching a university-level discussion class. I was interested in whether there are gender differences in who begins discussions. I begin by describing why I chose this topic and explaining some relevant points from the literature on gender differences in linguistic interaction. I then divide the discussion section into sections describing two week periods, as these roughly correspond to themes in my observations; first I describe my initial observations, then more detailed observations, followed by attempts to change behavior, and finally what worked and what did not work in terms of changing behavior. I will conclude with the main points I found and some limitations of my classroom practice.

INTRODUCTION

I decided to investigate if there are gender differences in beginning discussions. The classes I teach are discussion-focused classes in which students have two group discussions per class, so there is ample chance to observe this phenomenon in my classes. Starting is important because it influences how the discussion will develop and it sets the group norm for who will control the discussion. Another practical reason for choosing to look at starting discussions is that this is a taught component of my course. In the second week of the second semester, students of levels 2-4 study how to choose topics and how to change topics. By Week 5 they are all (theoretically) able to do this and have had sufficient practice of doing so.

I chose gender differences because I agree with Kubota (2003), who believes there is a lack of attention to gender in the field of second language research. From what has been observed, Clark and Trafford (1995, p. 319) found that boys more often take the lead in answering questions, and they cite research by Scott (1980) and Stanworth (1981) to further support their claim. Other research has found that "men talk more than women, who expend a great deal of energy asking questions, taking up the men's topics, and providing conversational support in terms of backchannelling" (Jones, Kitetu, & Sunderland, 1997, p. 483), and this is carried over to second language situations. Kelly (1991) found that men tend to talk for longer than women, and men often ignore what has been said before and use their turn to make their own point, whereas women tend to acknowledge the contribution of the previous speaker. Okamoto (1995, p. 298) notes that the Japanese language is comparatively more gender divided in terms of speaker roles and language used, and that one characteristic of women's language is that it is less assertive.

DISCUSSION

Weeks 5 and 6

In Week 5 I chose to observe my 4 classes which had an equal number of males and females. My observation was informal; I simply paid attention to see if I noticed any patterns or trends. However, I did not notice anything that stuck out. After this first week I decided that I needed to widen the scope and look at all of my classes instead of just the classes with an equal gender balance.

In Week 6 I paid attention to all of my classes. Something became very apparent; rather than gender factors influencing who began discussions, I noticed that the students who I *thought* would speak first were usually the ones who spoke first. In other words, my preconceptions about

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the students in the class who lead discussions usually correlated with who actually did speak first. It was the stronger level students doing this in the majority of cases, with the weaker students not starting. It is striking that these group dynamics had developed so strongly after just five lessons together.

Clearly then, although gender may be one factor in discussion dynamics, it is one of many. Another factor which could affect who starts is student level, as I mentioned, because confident students are more likely to speak first. An additional factor is how clearly students understand the question itself, as sometimes students are unsure about what a question means, due to a lack of vocabulary or simply not understanding the wording of the question. A further factor is how many ideas students have about the question topic, because if they do not have much to contribute they may wait for others to speak first. The possible influence of these other factors meant that I needed to do more comprehensive observation, and so I realised that I needed to make some notes to help me record who was beginning discussions.

Weeks 7 and 8
During Week 7 I implemented an informal check system in every class. The discussions my students do contain two main questions about the topic. I recorded the first two speakers, and also recorded the first two speakers if the group moved from one question to the next. I did this for the two discussions that students do in each class. I noted whether the speakers were male or female. I also noted their approximate level relative to other students in the class, by writing a 1, 2 or 3 for each student (1 being highest). I made this note about levels because I wanted to further check my feeling that student level was a crucial factor in initiating discussions. Taking these notes meant that I have a solid base upon which to make the comments that I will make for the remainder of this discussion. My observations are not based simply on intuition, but on observing 2 discussions in 11 different classes over a number of weeks.

During Week 7 my feeling from the previous week was borne out. It was usually the higher-level students in the group who started the discussion. Occasionally this was not the case, and in these situations it seemed that when students were more comfortable the lower level ones sometimes started the discussion. Lower level students in a group with friends started more than when they were in a group with people they were less familiar with. Both of these observations would seem to be intuitive, as stronger students should be more confident and group dynamics are important for feeling comfortable.

In Week 8 I carried on using the check sheet. It continued to be the case that the higher levels students started more often, and I did not observe any gendered division. One noteworthy point came up during this week in terms of changing student behavior. In these classes I gave students a self-check sheet after the first discussion in the class. Students had to decide what target language they were using well and what target language they needed to use more. Students then told a partner their strong points and their objective for what they need to do more in the next discussion. During the second discussion I noticed that some students who would not normally start were doing so. Clearly, the self-check sheet had alerted some students to the fact that they should start discussions, and these students were implementing their self-feedback. This highlighted the basic importance of goal-setting for changing the discussion dynamics.

Weeks 9 and 10
Week 9 was a test lesson, so there was little time for detailed feedback here. However, during these lessons I told all classes of the need to use a range of language that we had studied. I had students refer back to the self-check sheet they made in the previous week's class. Additionally, after the

first discussion I wrote on the board the number of different language functions that each group used. Students could see how well their group performed each language function. In the two preceding discussions before the test there was a wider range of who started the discussions. This is further evidence of how specific feedback helps students to focus. The style of feedback I used in this week's lesson was about self-awareness, and the onus was on the students to modify their behaviour. As I mentioned in the introduction, starting discussions is an important issue because it is a meta-factor which influences the direction of the discussion. It is not simply a question of using an isolated vocabulary item; it is something which affects the whole dynamic of the discussion. I decided that it required more work to change the entrenched group dynamics, so I would make the feedback style more explicit in the next week's class.

In Week 10, therefore, I took stronger action to affect changes in group dynamics. At the end of the class I wrote the following questions on the board and had students discuss them in pairs:
1. Who was the first person to speak in discussion 1?
2. Who was the first is person to speak in discussion 2?
3. How often do you start the discussions? Often / Sometimes / Rarely

Interestingly, students could understand the meaning of these questions but could not answer them quickly. I would say that in general starting the discussions was not something that students had thought about. It was not a salient aspect of discussions for them. After students had discussed these questions I explained that there were trends in the class that some people often started the discussions. I praised this as active participation, but asked these people to let others begin next week. I told students that if they do not often begin they should try to do so next week. I finished by explaining that the class as a whole had a group objective to balance the beginning of discussions next week. One interesting point that struck me about this is that teachers usually give feedback to individual students based on elements of class behaviour that relate to their grades. What I was saying, however, was 'collective' feedback, so everyone had a stake in it. This kind of feedback is very easy and non-confrontational because it is aimed at the class as a whole. Each class on my course receives a written comment that they can access online, summarising strong points from the lesson and things to improve. I followed up on my in-class feedback by emphasizing in these online comments that in the next lesson one objective for all students was either to let others start, or to start themselves, as the case may be.

Weeks 11 and 12
In the previous lesson I had emphasised the importance of balancing who begins discussions, so I wanted to follow up on this in week 11. At the end of the week 11 classes I wrote the following question on the board and had students discuss it in pairs:
"Did you try to balance who starts the discussion in this lesson?"
In every instance the answer was 'no'! Students usually had a flash of recognition as they remembered the advice I gave, and a realization that they had completely forgotten to do it.

I then took two different approaches. For Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday classes I reemphasized the need to balance starting and reemphasized the need to keep trying to achieve this objective in the next lesson. For Thursday, Friday and Saturday classes I reemphasized the same points, but also had students write a reminder in their textbook on the pages containing the discussion question of the following week's class. Students who rarely began discussions had to write "Start!", those who sometimes began wrote "Maybe start" and those who often began wrote "Don't start!" For all classes I again included a reminder in the online class comments, stressing that balancing who begins discussions is still the challenge next week.

The final week of my observation, week 12, was the most interesting. For the classes in the first half of the week who only received a verbal explanation from me about the need to balance starting discussions, pretty much everyone slipped back into their old habits. In other words, I did not notice any change in the established class pattern. However, for the classes who had made a note on the page in the textbook it was *completely* different. These classes achieved a much better balance. Upon turning to that page, many students actually read out loud their reminder word (unprompted by me). This is strong evidence of the need for constant reminders immediately before beginning a task. This is potentially the most important observation, I feel, because it shows that certain things are hard-wired or developed as group traits. They require a lot of work to change.

CONCLUSION

My observations indicate that gender does not have a significant influence on who begins discussions. Instead, I found that student level is a much more salient factor. I was surprised by how predictable the patterns of discussion were in my classes, and I was surprised by how easy it was to predict who would start the discussions. This highlights the importance of addressing this issue as early as possible. By the time I started observing my classes, they had developed interaction patterns which were hard to change. In terms of my attempts to modify this behavior, the central point is the importance of immediate reminders of feedback. Verbal explanations can be understood but will most likely not be remembered. Students uniformly forget my advice over the period of a week. A reminder of what to do before starting a task is crucial. Similarly, making notes in the textbook was an extremely useful aid to remembering. The steps I took to address this issue were useful to varying degrees, depending on how explicit the feedback and advice was. Another method I could have tried was allocating a 'starter' for each group. One way to do this would be to allocate the starter randomly by cards, or more directly by specifying the person in each group who had to speak first.

Although I sought to address this issue of who began, one limitation of my feedback is that I simply asked students to decide how often they feel they start discussions. This perception is not necessarily accurate. More importantly, I provided no concrete way for students to measure starting or not starting. They just went on their feelings, and they had to decide if they got the balance right. There was no guidance on how to achieve the balance and no way to know if it was achieved; the goal was too abstract. Another issue is that the point I gave feedback on is not directly connected to grades. There is no extrinsic motivation for students to do this. Although it makes the discussion 'fairer' and it leads to different interaction dynamics, these are fairly abstract concepts, and they may be less important than simply thinking about what students need to say in a discussion. In other words, the cognitive load of dealing with all the other demands of a course and trying to articulate ideas in English does not leave much room for more esoteric objectives.

I started by looking at gender differences, but I soon found that this was not a relevant factor. This may indicate that if gender differences exist in second language use they work in other, subtler ways than the specific points I investigated. It also indicates that there is a range of factors affecting student behavior, and gender is not a simple factor to measure.

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