Possible effects of gender on teacher-student interactions

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Abstract

Scheduled teacher-student writing conferences between a fifth grade teacher and her language arts class were analyzed. Attention was given to four case study students to examine the influence of gender on the teacher-student interactions. The study also investigated whether there was a difference in terms of confidence and competence toward writing among the entire classroom. A self-efficacy survey, audio-taped interviews, written texts, and audio-and-video-taped writing conferences revealed that girls were more confident and competent than boys. Girls and boys displayed diverse interaction styles and the teacher had varying roles and conferencing styles according to the student’s gender.

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1. Purpose of the Study

Subsequent work in the area of written composition has often mentioned gender as it related to socialization practices, discourse styles, power, topical focus, goals, and perceptions of writing. Thus gender related inquiry has been marginalized or subsumed within other aims of the research agenda. Few studies focus on the influences of gender on the quality and nature of writing conferences, so given what is known about the influence of the teacher and student’s gender on writing, I chose to investigate further the nature of interaction between a female teacher conferring with girls and boys. I do this to determine if the nature of interaction differed among boys and girls and whether they differed on their confidence and competence toward writing. Research questions of this study were:

1. Do girls and boys differ in terms of their competence in writing?
2. Do girls and boys differ in terms of their confidence toward writing?
3. What is the nature of scheduled teacher-student conferences with fifth-grade boys versus girls in terms of length, questions asked, interruptions, content, ownership, participants’ roles, and praise statements?

2. Literature Review

Since the 1970s gender stereotypes and gender differences were the subject of numerous studies. Donald Grave’s ground breaking process research pointed out that girls and boys differed in their approaches to writing. Girls took a more reflective stance toward writing while boys took a more reactive one (Graves, 1975). Boys wrote more about...
exploring the broader world and girls wrote about family and community (Graves, 1973). Similarly it was observed that girls tend to write about community (home events, shopping, dolls, clothes) while boys like to write about action and competition (ninja turtles, cars, videogames (Dyson, 1997; Keenan, Wilson, & Willet, 1999). Additionally, in terms of interactions, girls tend to behave in a cooperative manner emphasizing friendship, closeness, and equity while boys behave in a more competitive manner emphasizing winning and keeping control (Coates, 1995; Goodwin, 1993; Sheldon, 1993; Talbot, 2003).

Gender studies, in general, tend to focus on adult interaction (Tannen, 1993) including topic raising and amount of talk (James & Drakich, 1993), or characteristics of male and female talk such as indirectness, interruptions, amount and nature of talk (Tannen, 1993). Although gendered talk has been studied in preschool disputes (Sheldon, 1993) adolescent response to literature (Benjamin, 1998; Fine & Weis, 2003), and dialogic reading with caregivers (Rubin, 1993) little is known about gender as it relates to talk about writing (Bus, VanIJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Deckner, Adamson, & Bakeman, 2006; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Such studies exist regarding what children write about and in what genres (Dyson, 1997, Keenan, Wilson, & Willet, 1999, Wolmark, 1995 ), self-efficacy beliefs toward writing (Pajares, Miller, & Johnson, 1999; Pajares & Valiante, 1997, 2001a), how boys write (Fletcher, 2006), gendered ways of reading and assessing essay texts (Read, Francis, & Robson, 2005; Rubin, 1993), and on-line environments where gender is excluded as an influential factor (Carabajal, La Pointe, & Gunawardena, 2003).

As regards the teacher’s role, it is clear from gender studies in general that talk is also a function of power (distance) and solidarity (closeness) and that the teacher/parent roles have asymmetric relationships (Tannen, 1993) in that teachers have the power in classrooms. They interrupt more, set topics, and can be indirect. In this regard, it becomes essential to study teacher’s reactions to gender neutral and dependent texts as well as to the students themselves in the context of the teacher/student writing conference.

3. Methods

A mixed methods research design with multiple case studies was used. Thus, both qualitative and quantitative data was collected to describe and summarize data. The principal interest in this study, in terms of qualitative research, was girls and boys interactions with their teacher during writing conferences. The data was obtained from Self-efficacy Scale (Pajares, Miller, & Johnson, 1999), analysis of students’ written texts, interviews, field notes, and audio and video taped teacher-student writing conferences.

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were a fifth-grade teacher and her 22 students (11 boys and 11 girls) coming from a K-12 charter school that located in the southeastern part of the United States. Two of the students were African Americans, two Asian Americans, and two Mexican students. The rest of her students were white American. The average student age was 10.5 years. None of the students were reported having learning difficulties or disabilities. Four case study participants were randomly selected by someone out side of the research without knowing any information about the students. Two girls and two boys were selected and grouped under their gender. The girls and boys had similar scores in both scales. In order to minimize the high versus low confidence and competence effect, one of the students had higher scores in writing test and self-efficacy scores and the other one had lower scores in both scales, in each group.

3.2. Data Collection

After all the consent letters were collected, at the beginning of the study, the Self-Efficacy Scale with nine items was administered to all the students in the classroom. After the scale was collected students were asked to write a personal narrative to explain one of their special days. Later the students had interviews with the researcher about their favorite writing genres, writing strategies, and how they see themselves as writers. The research setting was
visited by the researcher five times a week for 75 minutes daily for thirteen weeks. As a qualitative researcher, she documented what she saw, heard, and read in the field. To investigate the interaction between the teacher and the students, scheduled teacher-student writing conferences were audio and video taped to better catch the teacher’s contact with girls and boys.

3.3. Data Analyses

Students’ texts were read by two graduate students who were experienced in teaching and grading writing and are not involved in the study. The personal narratives were scored by the same rubric that is used in the state mandatory test in the state of Florida (FCAT Writing). Thus, the students’ texts were scored based on the excellence of focus, organization, support, and conventions of the texts. In order to investigate the conference interaction, thirty-two writing conferences, sixteen with girls and sixteen with boys, with 2153 turns were transcribed and analyzed based on a rubric was designed by the researchers. Therefore, each conference was examined by its features in terms of focus, conference agenda, ownership, number and functions of questions asked, turn taking, frequency of talk, praises, over speech, and interruptions.

4. Findings

Interview data showed that majority of the students of both gender liked writing stories since that genre allowed them to be creative and write about anything they wanted. Boys and girls provided almost equal number of strategies to improve the quality of a text. When they were asked about their confidence in writing, one boy stated that he does not think that he is good at writing while the remaining group of students divided equally under two categories saying they are good at writing and they are sometimes good at writing. Again one of the girls (9%) thought that she is not good at writing. Majority of the students (73%) considered themselves as good writers while 18% of the girls stated that they are sometimes good at writing.

Girls had higher scores from both self-efficacy scale and written texts. Field observation also supported the fact that girls were more willing to talk about writing. When we compare girls and boys in terms of amount of talk, number of questions asked, and interruptions/overlaps occurred we can see that girls dominated 48.5% of the conference talk while boys could dominated only 31% of conference talk. Conference interactions yielded that girls were more like an equal partner in conferences in terms of turn taking and frequency of talk comparing to boys. Conferences with girls lasted longer than conferences with boys. Even though boy’s conferences were shorter, equal number of disruptions, nineteen, occurred by other students and teachers, occurred in both groups. However, the amount of time spent for these outside interruptions were longer in boys’ conferences.

Similar to related literature boys asked more questions than girls. When I look at the function or purpose of those questions, the difference can be even more apparent in two sexes. For instance, majority of the questions (39%) asked by the girls were offering solutions and recommendations to fix their papers which also allowed girls to take the ownership more frequently than boys. The second most popular category for the girls was for asking information about their assignment (26%). Clarifying what the teacher said and checking for their understanding, girls also used questioning (18%). Two of the questions asked by the girls were for getting permission from the teacher while 4% of the questions were used in each category for socializing process and getting information. Unlike girls, boys’ most popular questions were produced for seeking information (30%) and checking for understanding about what the teacher asked them to do (30%). Similar to girls their second frequent questions were for getting information about their assignments (18%). These boys asked only three questions in each category of guessing or providing solutions and asking for permission. Once again, unlike girls, boys did not have any questions for the purpose of social talk.

Girls’ conferences were more focused and girls were more active on determining the conference agenda and keeping the power. Additionally they received more specific feedback during conference talk. The teacher asked more questions when conferring with boys however three most frequent question types were the same for each group. These types were: questions specifically about students’ texts, information seeking questions, and open ended
questions that actually allowed students to set the conference agenda and have the ownership. The teacher played a nurturer role when conferring with boys. For instance, she asked more questions to check students’ understandings and to provide examples and suggestions for boys to decide when fixing their papers.

References


