A POST STRUCTURAL INQUIRY INTO FEMALE ESL LEARNERS' GENDER IDENTITIES AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigates how English language learning interacts with the gender identities and roles of female learners at the University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan. Who learns what and how, is influenced by the learners' gendered and sexualized identities (Pavlenko, 2004). Language learners have to navigate power relations within the classroom and their specific communities and develop understanding of their limitations and opportunities within these communities. Institutional practices and gender ideologies inhibit their access to networks which in turn affect their linguistic output and interactional opportunities. Within Interpretive epistemological framework eight female learners of final year (fourth year) Linguistics studying at IELL were interviewed and observed twice during one year to gather data for the present study. From the data it appeared that Pakistani females' access to linguistic resources is mediated by cultural norms and societal expectations. Throughout their academic journeys the learners' agency remained active due to which they were able to invest in their ESL learning and challenge socially imposed identities on them.
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Keywords: Identity, Gender Roles, Power, L2 Learning.

INTRODUCTION

In post colonial countries like Pakistan English language learning and its uses are linked with power and prestige (Shamim, 2011). English is implicated in the social fabric of the society so much that inequality is not just linked with class, race and gender but also with access to lingua franca of the world- English. English language learning provides an opportunity for economic success (Pavlenko, 2004). Access to powerful forums in the society depends on knowing their language which is English; as it helps one fulfill their personal as well as professional and social goals. Therefore, Pennycook (1998) has emphasized the gate keeping role of English in post colonial societies in particular. Since English has assumed such an important position in the world's educational system, it has become a tool for exclusion and inclusion for

further education, employment and social climbing. Since knowledge of English language is essential in maintaining and changing power relations in Pakistani society (Rahman, 1999, 2001), it's necessary to examine how female learners' gender identity interacts with English language teaching at the University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan (UoSJP).

Conceptualizing Identity

The present study focuses on the web of normative practices, institutions and performances available to female learners which allow them certain subject positions which they identify with and build a sense of their distinctive self (Bakhtain, 1981). Conceptually the work is situated at the borderline between two indistinguishable categories; gender and identity and their interaction with ESL. Identity researchers consider language as a social practice and how it affects and is affected by social relations. Central to this relationship of language and identity is the understanding that such relations are never constructed on equal terms which reflects the power imbalance in the wider social world. Therefore, language is the site where learners' experiences are organized and identities are negotiated (Norton, 2000).

Learners are not fixed entities but are anchored by social forces which influence their sense of self or who they are (Arnold, 1999). This conceptualization of self rests on the assumption of a reciprocal link between the self and society (Stryker, 1980).In the present study, I have followed the feminist poststructuralist conception of identity as "multiple, changing, and site of struggle" (Weedon, 1997) and drawn on Pennycook (1998), Norton (2000), Pavlenko and Piller (2008) and Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) to explore the intersections of second language learning, gender and social identity. Norton and Toohey (2001) have characterized language learners' identity as multiple, a site of struggle and liable to change. The specific conditions under which learners speak, read and write second language or remain silent are embedded with power relations. Learners who may be marginalized at one site may gain power in another site. Therefore, each time a second language learner engages in second language activities in oral or written form they are engaged in the formation and negotiation of their social identities (Norton & Toohey, 2001).

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

Women have been a neglected area of research in higher education worldwide; the situation is no better in Pakistan where women are not much talked about in the mainstream literature. Especially in ELT there is

a dearth of literature on Pakistani female learners' agency and learning experiences in their specific communities. This study aims to redress this imbalance and aims to put women and their concerns in education on the front line in research agenda. This research project is based on the experiences of women and how they perceive themselves as 'women' and 'ESL learners'. How power relations are negotiated through English language learning and translated into struggle for change is the focus of the study. As a starting point the work does not universalize the term, 'women', it rather aims to gain insight into female learners' diverse experiences within the context of the University of Sindh, to explore their identity building process.

RESEARCH QUESTION
        The overarching question guiding the research is:
        How female learners' gender identities are negotiated as a result of their English language learning?

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY
        University education in Pakistan is considered as a privileged prospect. In Sindh the enrollment of female students in public and private universities, at Maters and PhD level is 48%, whereas the male enrollment is 52%. In 2014-15 more girls were estimated to be enrolled in universities than boys (Status of Women, 2016). In Pakistan in all public and private universities English is taught at undergraduate and post graduate levels as a compulsory subject, which is the case with the University of Sindh as well where the present study was conducted. The significance of English can be understood from the fact that it's a mandatory subject whereas Urdu, the national language is not (Mansoor, 2005; Malik, 1996).
        The government of Pakistan has stated in its education policy (Ministry of Education, 2009) that it aims to increase the communicative competence of its learners to meet the demands of global market and the rapidly changing educational scene of Pakistan. Therefore, a large budged has been allocated for research and planning of ELT reforms in the country by Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (Shamim, 2011). Following this, new ESL courses such as Remedial English have been introduced in universities since 2006, which is taught as mandatory subject to undergraduate learners for two semesters in almost all public universities of Pakistan. This is followed by English Compulsory in second year which is also taught for two semesters. These courses have been designed with the purpose of improving learners' reading, writing,

speaking and listening skills with a focus on providing them interactive opportunities within the classroom without gender, ethnic or racial discrimination (Curriculum for English, 2008).

Public universities including UoSJP, where the present study was conducted, offer ESL programs which are taught parallel with other subjects to impart basic English language skills to the learners. The goal of these programs is to "develop [students'] ability to communicate effectively, enable [them] to read effectively and independently any intermediate level text, make [their] experience of learning English more meaningful and enjoyable, enable [them] to use grammar and language structure in context" (Curriculum for English, 2008:16).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Latest research in the field of SLA recognizes that people are not free to form any identity they desire due to tensions between individual agency and socio historically situated unequal power relations (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2001; Butler, 1999; Cameron, 1995; Davies & Harré, 1990; Norton, 2000; Omoniyi & White, 2006; Pennycook, 1998). Brah (1996) argues that women's membership in communities and their practices must be examined within the frame of social relations and power structures. Post structural research shows that in case L2 learners cannot form legitimate identities through L2, their learning may be halted despite the high symbolic value attached with the target language. This view of language has clear implications for the view of linguistic competence which implies more than formal structures. Norton Peirce (1995) and Miller (2000, 2003) hold that Bourdieu's (1991) conception of linguistic competence as the 'power to impose reception', may be extended by adding the 'right to speak' which is essential for L2 learning. It is argued that a learner may speak or remain silent according to the given power structures in the society which assign specific values to learners within a given community and society (Bourdieu, 1986; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko, 2007). In this regard gender, race, class and sexual orientation may cause inequalities in social practices which cause the learners to behave in peculiar ways (Pavlenko, 2007). However, second language learners try to avoid marginalization by putting up overt or covert forms of resistance. The learners take up various subject positions by investing in English as an L2, adopting different strategies to resist passive and subordinate positioning in the dominant discourses, hence; their identity is a site of constant struggle.

Gender and ESL Learning

According to Butler (1999:32), "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a 'natural' kind of being". Such acts are culturally constructed and granted legitimacy with time. Gender is in fact the cultural beliefs and values linked with ones' biological sex. Biological make up and bodies are inseparable parts of cultural histories of societies as they are affected by inventions and symbolic or technological advancements. By focusing on performativity of gender (Butler, 1999) one can understand how female subjects are regulated in the society by making them perform culturally acceptable and gender appropriate actions. People acquire memberships of communities by using language actively and in doing so they become part of that culture while it is constructed discursively through language.

In recent times there is an increasing awareness among researchers of the problematic nature of binary approach on gender differences which underpinned the deficit, dominance and difference models (Cameron, 1995; Talbot, 1997). Language is now considered more complex as it interacts with identity be it linguistic, ethnic, religious or sexual. Researchers such as Cameron (2006), Pavlenko & Blackledge (2004), and Sunderland (2000) have studied the intersection of gender and language learning which goes beyond the binaries of male/ female relations towards a broader understanding of the social structure and discursive practices that result in inequality among women, disabled people and minorities. Sunderland's (2000) study suggested that in certain contexts female learners may be more involved in ESL learning than males and may even outperform them. Pavlenko's (2004) work is quite remarkable in bringing to light the relationship between gender and various forms of oppression. Pavlenko (2001), Teutsch-Dweyer (2001) and Ohara (2001) have stated the process of transformation people undergo in their understanding and discursive performance of gender through linguistic and cultural transitions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current research grew out of my personal interest in the identity construction of young women studying English as an L2 at the UoSJP. The post structural view of identity as being fluid and socially constructed (Norton, 1997, 2000) motivated this research. Behind the present work is the ontological assumption that knowledge is socially constructed and there are multiple truths and realities not a single universal truth (Burr, 2015). Qualitative methods are more suitable to study the trajectories of

language, power, and identity formation as qualitative researchers focus on socially constructed nature of reality, the inextricable link between the researcher and the researched and situational restrictions which impact the inquiry (Golden-Bridle & Locke, 1997).

Non-probability purposeful sampling was employed for the study because the research aimed to examine the participants' own perspective regarding their identity and gendered behavior and how they interact with their ESL learning. This method involves the selection of the participants who were deemed to provide the best information. Participants were recruited based upon the assumption that they possessed some knowledge and understanding of the phenomena under investigation. This method is particularly useful in studies based on the attitudes and beliefs of a certain community (women ESL learners in case of the present study).

Eight female learners of final year (fourth year) Linguistics were interviewed and observed twice during one year to gather data for the present study. For data collection semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth interviews were conducted with each respondent. The interviews were conducted bilingually in Sindhi as well as in English. Time and again I shared my own experience also with my subjects to allow them to open up and to establish a friendly relationship with them. Our relationship transcended the research as the girls often dropped by my office for a cup of tea (Cohen & Manion, 1996) and discussed their academic as well as personal issues. The data was triangulated by conducting non-participant observation of ESL classes at IELL and it was analyzed employing content analysis. The process comprised of data transcription and reduction. In the third stage, the data was classified thematically and interpretations were drawn from it.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The starting hypothesis for my thesis was that young Pakistani females negotiate new identities as they navigate through spaces of ESL learning in higher education. Literature suggests identity is multiple (Parmenter, 2000; Hall, 1993) context dependant (Harrell, 1996; Norton 2010) and fluid (Miller, 2000; Brown, 2004). These characteristics of identity were apparent from the data collected and analyzed during the present research. The research revealed that female learners' gender identities influence their choices and investment towards learning. Gender identities in particular had a minimizing effect on their access to linguistic resources and interactional opportunities. From the data it appeared that the female learners' agencies throughout remained active which allowed

them to challenge restrictive social boundaries and exercise their choice in how they learn and moved about in the society.

As Nabeeha pointed out "Because of my English language skills I have read all kinds of literature from psychology to other subjects. It has broadened my horizons. I talk about gender fluidity and other such subjects which are still new to many people. I have helped my friends edit their essays and helped them in studies. I feel empowered because of my English" (Interview, Nabeela, 3rd Year).

The gender identities of the ESL learners in the present study collided with their familial responsibilities and expected gender roles as women are supposed to carry out all domestic chores in Pakistani society. The obstacles narrated by my participants are similar to those reported by the Bangladeshi and Pakistani female ESOL learners of Ward and Spacey's Research (2008) who reported domestic responsibilities as a major obstacle in ESL learning of their participants. Such findings were supported by Rind (2016) who noted that his female learners had to carry out all domestic responsibilities like cooking and cleaning after university hours, yet they devoted maximum time to their studies especially the subjects which they regarded as most important.

Azaadi said, "Because I have to fulfill my duties which are also right of men. The time I am being in university I am free, study and talk and no house work. But home is suffocating and too much domestic things / works" (Interview, Azaadi, 4th Year).

Beena had similar views about her family, she said "Being a girl is like being an inferior creature, we have many responsibilities at home including cooking and cleaning with our mothers but no rights as such. Society, traditions, laws and men are together in enslaving women. We are sort of born to serve" (Interview, Beena, 4th Year).

The participants appeared to be challenging their gender based roles and domestic responsibilities owing to the exposure English language offered them through their investments in reading, movies and social media. They all had this realization that their gender roles do not define them as individuals. They identified themselves with competent speakers and ESL learners rather than just women.

Impact of ESL Course on Female Learner Identities

The female learners felt dissatisfied with the topics introduced in R.E. class by the teachers which were mostly related with the experiences of men like hazards of smoking and driving. Some teachers introduced topics such as whitening creams, makeup and ladies fashion which had a

demoralizing effect on the female students as they felt that the male students used these topics to degrade women. Similar findings were indicated by Amna's (2009) study of identity and curriculum at primary education in Pakistan. The study argues governments policies contribute to female illiteracy in Pakistan such as the textbooks used in schools which show a preference for males over females and focus on the skills needed by men . There is a preference for male figure who is depicted as strong, powerful and dominant in every walk of life whereas women are depicted as weak, submissive and confined to the four walls of the house.

Samiasaid "R.E. teachers taught tenses, through reading texts and fill in the blanks type of things which we already know. The lessons are all about men, there is not much depiction of women. There is no multimedia and exercises given in the book for listening are also done just by reading. We feel disconnected when teachers talk about rules of traffic etc. Overall, I think R.E. doesn't improve speaking and listening skills" (Interview, Samia, 2nd Year).

One of the expected outcomes of the ESL course was to "bridge the gap" between male and female students by encouraging them to interact with each other through discussion (Howe *et.al.,* 2006:4). González-Lloret (2003) stated that interactive activities may help to increase interactional opportunities for learners from diverse socio cultural backgrounds. However, this was not the case in the ESL classes under discussion. Lessons like "A traffic nightmare" (Howe *et.al.,* 2006:3) were extremely boring for the female learners as most of them didn't drive. Especially girls from rural areas found it strange as they didn't relate to it. The female learners felt marginalized and left out of the discussion because of the topics introduced by the teachers for discussion in the classes.

Gender identities of my participants didn't appear to be self-contained. Learners as social agents have multiple and overlapping identities which intersect in myriad ways with different aspect of ESL experiences of the learners. In response to various contexts the participants negotiated different identities. For example, it was noted during observations that during classroom interactions most of the participants fore-grounded their gender identities as girls and refrained from communicating with boys. Maria said in this regard: "Mostly girls avoid boys in the class. It's considered decent to avoid boys in the class so we mostly avoided talking to boys" (Interview, Maria, 4th Year).

Consequently, they reinforced boundaries set by traditional values of Pakistani society. The same was the case in pair work and group

discussions where girls formed same–sex groups and avoided men due to social mores. The data reveal that learners' choice to speak or remain silent, their agency, investment and even opinions were highly influenced by their gender positioning in the society. It is through power relations that an individual takes up various subject positions such as, daughter, sister and woman. It's however, necessary to understand that subjects are not passive as they have agency to actively author their self within particular sites such as community and society. The power dimensions always affect the second language speaker unequally. The second language learner while speaking considers the listeners worthy to be listened to and expects the same for herself (Norton, 2000). The majority of the participants felt that they had to navigate between social, cultural and religious discourses, contest/challenge stereotypical labeling to build new identities. My participants were simultaneously negotiating various identities and cultural expectations including how they should behave inside and outside classroom and how to speak whether they spoke in Sindhi or English. This research participant over the time seemed to wield power of oral presentations, by aligning themselves with likeminded teachers and students. In my discourse they felt at ease with and by ignoring adverse remarks of male class fellows.

CONCLUSION

ESL learners are products of the society in which they live, having multiple, fluctuating, even colliding identities. The current study places women's agency at the fore front in constructing their identities as it emerged through discussions and observations during the data collection phase. To highlight the active role played by these young women in the negotiation of their identities I have employed post structural theoretical framework which recognizes the significance of power, language and identity. Learners come to the classroom with their own multiple identities which must be kept in mind by course designers, material planners and ESL teachers. Such an awareness of learner identities will help in reducing learners' anxiety and help them increase their communicative competence. Introducing text books which are gender sensitive can be empowering for female learners and may create an inclusive, pluralistic environment in the class among students of diverse backgrounds.

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