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Interaction between Female and Male Students in University Tutorials

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ABSTRACT This paper reports on the effects of tutor gender on students' participation in university tutorials. It was hypothesized that students' 'participation effectiveness', that is the quantity of the speaker's discourse acts and turns, speaker's initiative during interaction and turn-taking levels would differ according to the gender of their tutor. Furthermore, students' participation would be affected by whether or not their gender was the same as that of their tutor. An integrated analytical framework with discourse categories like acts and turns was developed to analyze patterns of interaction and answer the question of how the quality of such patterns might be assessed. The main construct investigated was 'participation effectiveness' and the findings indicated that the female students' mean values for discourse acts in the female tutor-led tutorials were four times higher than those of the female students in the male tutor-led tutorials. The male students' mean values for discourse acts in the male tutor-led tutorials, on the other hand, were higher than those of the male students in the female tutor-led tutorials. In terms of turn participation, the male students' turns per student were higher than those of the female students in the male tutor-led tutorials, while in the female tutor-led tutorials, the female students' turns per student were higher than those of the male students.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the North-West University (Mafikeng campus) witnessed an increase in the number of female students compared to the male students. Having more female students than males indicates a clear participation in higher education of especially the previously disadvantaged section of the population that is female students. Most of the students at this institution come from disadvantaged educational backgrounds, with teachers who mostly use the students' mother-tongue to teach English, yet at university these students are expected to have acquired requisite academic skills and be adequately proficient in English, which is not their primary language. Studies have shown that high school education does not adequately prepare students for tertiary education (Nel et al. 2009: 975). To curb this lack of competency in the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) it is important for lecturers to not only impart knowledge by way of essentially monologue discourse, where a lecturer is expected to do all or nearly all the speaking, while the students listen, but by also including opportunities for students to engage in meaningful social interaction with users of the second language. This could be done through tutorials which have been shown to enhance understanding of content, improve participation in lectures of students with limited competencies and provide opportunities for students to try out new language through negotiating meaning in a relaxed, anxiety free learning environment (Hlatshwayo 2012). The focus of the study was however not to explore matters that would ultimately resolve the language problems students bring to the university, but to develop their ability to participate actively in tutorials so as to improve both their subject areas and their spoken discourse competence in the language. This problem was however dealt with indirectly as the objective of the study was to explore whether or not tutor gender might affect students' participation in groups that might not be familiar with the norms and conventions of speech floors and turn-taking in tutorials using a discourse analytical framework that addresses the issue of what constitutes quality or effectiveness in such interactions and the extent to which this may be measured and assessed.

The research question posed was: how tutor gender might affect student participation effectiveness in tutorials? Tutorials were selected for analysis because of their importance as learning activities in which students can use language in an interactive way to negotiate meaning in a context of their chosen subjects because

in lectures opportunities for interaction occur very rarely, yet students do need to ask questions, express points of view and generally interact and relate with their lecturers and other students through discussions (Webb 1983).

Background to the Research

Studies on gender have consistently shown that in mixed-gender interactions males control the topic of a conversation (Fishman 1977), exhibit more powerful behaviors than their female counterparts (Sadker and Sadker 1986), and tend to talk more than females (Holmes 1995). Females, on the other hand, get frequently interrupted and lose the speech floor to their male counterparts (De Klerk 1995; Carli 1990; Shijaku 2011), female students are less competitive in floor holding (Meeker and Weitzel-O'Neill 1977 in Carli 1990: 944) and tend to resort to tentative language, which puts them at a disadvantage and render them powerless (Lakoff 1975; O'Barr and Atkins 1980). The possible reason for this could be that male students take more initiative in interaction than female students (Duff and Warren 2001). Also, women participants do not 'put up a fight' for speech floor, hence they are perceived as submissive and powerless (Lakoff 1975). There is also evidence that indicate that in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) classes girls are less confident than boys in the knowledge of their subjects and may not feel confident enough to give answers (Sikoro and Pokropek 2012 in Eddy et al. 2014).

Research has also shown that different treatments received by male and female students from male and female teachers tend to encourage gender dominance in mixed-gender interactions. For example, in Madrid and Hughes (2010) teachers gave more attention to boys, they received more answers in public and were criticized for underperforming. Similarly, in Sadker and Sadker (1986) mathematics, language and literature male and female teachers directed more interactions toward male students and in non-science and natural science classes male students had more frequent and longer interactions with their teachers than did females (Sternglanz and Lyberger-Ficek 1977); the male students made more comments than females, asked more than one question and interacted with female teachers more than the female students (Boersma et al. 1981). In Shijaku's study (2011) both male and female students were encouraged to work harder but females were assisted more than males. In a different study where the instructor gender effect on students' achievement was explored, the findings revealed that female students performed better in examinations when a course was taught exclusively by female instructors. Also, in Butler and Christensen (2003 in Jansen and Horn 2009: 3) political science male students with female tutors outperformed those with male tutors. These findings are consistent with another study where college STEM female students taught by female instructors outperformed female students taught by male instructors (Eddy et al. 2014). However, in Jansen and Horn (2009) male students performed relatively better with male than female tutors.

Different treatments received by male students from their high school teachers tend to continue even in higher education, irrespective of 'whether the teachers are Black or White, female or male' (Sadker and Sadker 1986: 512). For example, in De Klerk (1995) a White female tutor nominated more male students in her seminars than female students. Similarly, Duff and Warren (2001) observed that female teachers showed a greater tendency than the male teachers to interact more with male than female students. In Madrid and Hughes (2010) the differences in class interaction between male and female students was attributed to the fact that some boys were more careful when they approached a female teacher. Girls, on the other hand, tried to gain the male teachers' attention. But both male and female students concurred in their own beliefs that they learnt more with female teachers, a view which was not shared by teachers, who perceived no difference between genders (Madrid and Hughes 2010: 8). These findings seem to suggest that the attention received by male students from both male and female teachers tends to encourage male dominance in these interactions. Shijaku (2011: 91) echoes this sentiment in the following words, 'Teachers sometimes perpetuate male dominance in the classroom, when they (often unconsciously) make males the focus of instruction by giving them more frequent meticulous attention'. But Brophy (1985 in Dee 2006: 532) feels that 'teachers do not systematically discriminate against students of the opposite sex.'

Theoretical Framework

This study used an integrated analytical framework with turns and discourse acts to examine students' 'participation effectiveness' operationalized as the number of discourse acts and turns, and initiative at discourse act and turn-taking levels. The integrated analytical framework was informed primarily by ideas about turn-taking initiative categories from Van Lier (1988) and discourse acts drawn from Hubbard (1998), but it went further than either of them by measuring initiative in terms of turn-taking and discourse acts. Turns were analyzed in terms of three of Van Lier's (1988) turn-categories, namely: allocation, self-selection and sequences. All three categories were initiative-bearing and were construed in similar ways as in Van Lier (1988), except for sequence, which in this study referred to only one intervening turn and not an indefinite number between the initial speaker's turn. This definition recognized a high degree of initiative taken by a speaker who stayed active on the speech floor when he/she took up alternate turns over a certain period. A non-initiative turn occurred when a speaker joined the speech floor through an allocated turn. The discourse acts in the integrated framework were: counter-inform (CI), comment (C), elicit (E), reply-inform (RI), inform (I) and acknowledge (A). As tutor elicits in the data were used to encourage students' participation, enhance comprehension of academic content, provide feedback to tutorial discussion questions and sustain interaction in tutorial discussions, it was therefore necessary to subdivide this act into different types of questions identified in the data, namely: closed-display, open-referential and closed-referential questions. If the focus had been just on elicit, it would have been very difficult to recognize the different functions performed by the tutor elicits and also the influence these different questions had on students' output in terms of quantity and quality of their discourse performance. For example, open-referential questions produced elaborate responses, while closed-display questions produced short responses such as 'Yes/No' and/ or acknowledges such as 'Right', 'Ok', etc. (Hlatshwayo 2012).

The discourse acts provided a more appropriate measurement in terms of participation effectiveness at discourse act level. But because the quantitative measurement did not distinguish between the different types of discourse acts in a more qualitative way, a second analytical construct, a cline of initiative, was postulated. In Hubbard (1998) the discourse acts in the cline were ranked intuitively, but in this study an attempt was made to assess this construct empirically by considering the extent to which the intuitions of a number of lecturers about the degree of initiative manifested in students' discourse acts would correlate with the ranking in the cline. The rank order for the cline of initiative from lowest to highest initiative was as follows:

Acknowledge was ranked the lowest act
Reply-inform followed acknowledgement
Inform followed reply-inform
Elicit followed inform
Comment followed elicit in rank; and
Counter-inform was ranked the highest

Acknowledge was ranked the lowest, simply because it recognizes a preceding contribution using short phrases such as Ok, Right, Sure etc. The second lowest ranked act was reply-inform because it requires predictable information and is usually a minimal response to a preceding closed-display question. Inform was ranked higher than reply-inform because it provides information beyond the minimum typical of reply-informs and usually expands on and clarifies a preceding act or turn. Elicit was placed after inform because it encompasses different types of questions identified in the data, namely: closed-display, open-referential and closed-referential questions. Comment was ranked second highest in terms of initiative because it normally provides unpredictable information that supports the comment made and counter-inform was perceived to reveal the most initiative because when students directly challenge aspects of the content of the preceding act or turn, this can demonstrate strong critical engagement that can considerably influence the direction of the discourse that follows.

To test the validity of this cline of initiative, ten lecturers in the Department of English rated 24 student turns each turn consisting of a single discourse act from 10 excerpts drawn from the data base of first-year and third-year tutorials. The reason for selecting single-act turns rather than multiple-act turns was to make the impressionistic rating by lecturers as straightforward as possible and to minimize contaminating effects from other acts in the same turn. The initiative assessment sheet had numbers 1-24 (each

number representing a different act in the excerpts) and the speech acts were rated on a scale of 1-4: 1 being no initiative, 2 very little initiative, 3 a fair degree of initiative and 4 a high degree of initiative. The ratings for the six discourse acts produced a two grouping structure rather than a cline. Counter-informs comments, elicits and informs were high initiative-bearing acts, while reply-informs and acknowledge were low initiative-bearing acts.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were to explore whether or not tutor gender might affect students' participation in groups that might not be familiar with the norms and conventions of speech floors and turn-taking in tutorials using a discourse analytical framework that addresses the issue of what constitutes quality or effectiveness in such interactions and the extent to which this may be measured and assessed.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed method, as it analyzed the data quantitatively as well as qualitatively. The hypothesis guiding the study was formulated generally as follows:

There is a relationship between tutor gender and student participation effectiveness in tutorials.

It was tested in terms of two sub-hypotheses, namely H_1 (a) and H_1 (b).

H_1 (a) Students' participation effectiveness would differ according to the gender of their tutor.

H1 (b) Students' participation effectiveness would differ according to whether or not their gender was the same as that of their tutor.

Participants

The total number of participants was 70 - 33 first-year students (15 males and 18 females) and 37 third-year students (17 males and 20 females) with five tutors, two females (Tutor A & F) and three males (Tutor C, D, E). Initially there were three female and three male tutors, but because Tutor B's two tutorial groups had more than ten students each, considerably larger than others, they were excluded. The decision to use first and third year students in this study was informed by the results of the pilot study conducted with first, second, and third year students in the Department of English, which suggested that there was very little difference between first-year and second-year students' participation in tutorials. Data were taken from 16 first and third year tutorial groups using a video camera. After transcription, turns were coded using the turn categories and utterances were segmented into Functional-units and labeled using the six discourse acts in the analytical framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results presented and discussed here constitute the findings on the main construct, students' participation effectiveness, with regard to discourse acts, discourse act initiative, turn participation and turn-taking initiative.

To test H_1 (a), namely the effects of tutor gender on students' participation irrespective of gender, the total number of the discourse acts of the students in the male tutor-led and female tutor-led tutorials were compared and the results indicated that the discourse act percentages of both groups were almost exactly the same, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Male versus female tutor and student discourse act (H_1 (a))

Tutorials	*The 5 Tutor's discourse acts*	*The 70 Student's discourse acts*	*Total acts*
Male-led tutorials T105,T114,T116, T301,T306,T310	215 (45.9%)	253 (54.1%)	468
Female-led tutorials T111,T112,T113,T115, T117,T305,T311, T312,T314	660 (45.7%)	785 (54.3%)	1445

This means that the Tutor Gender Hypothesis in terms of the total number of students' discourse acts in the male tutor-led and female tutor-led tutorials was therefore not supported.

Also the students' quality of performance or initiative measured in terms of high-initiative acts, namely counter-informs, comments, elicits and informs as opposed to low-initiative acts, namely reply-informs and acknowledges, showed that the students in the male tutor-led tutorials had slightly higher percentages for three of the four

high-initiative discourse acts, but both groups had very high percentages for informs and relatively low percentages for acknowledges, as evidenced by the figures in Table 2.

However, the statistical test on the relative proportions of high initiative acts to low-initiative acts indicated no significant difference (Chi-square = 0.34 (df=1); p=0.5598) between the students in the male tutor-led and female tutor-led tutorials. Thus in terms of the Tutor Gender Hypothesis, whether the tutors were male or female was a factor that did not appear to have any effect on the students' discourse act initiative.

In terms of turn participation (i.e. the overall frequency of turn-taking), the figures in Table 3 indicate that the students in the male tutor-led tutorials took proportionally more turns than the students in the female tutor-led tutorials. However, the statistical test revealed that this was not at all a significant difference (Chi-square=0.49 (df1); p=0.4839). There was therefore no support for the Tutor Gender Hypothesis in terms of number of student turns relative to tutor turns.

Table 3: Male versus female tutor and student turns (H_1 (a))

Tutorials	*Tutor turns*	*Student turns*	*Total turns*
Male-led tutorials T105, T114, T116, T301, T306, T310	72 (44.4%)	90 (55.6%)	162
Female-led tutorials T111, T112, T 113, T115, T 117, T305, T311, T312,T 314	250 (48%)	271 (52%)	521

With respect to turn-taking initiative measured by distinguishing the initiative-bearing from non-initiative-bearing turns, the figures in Table 4 indicate that the students in the female tutor-led tutorials had a higher percentage for non-initiative-bearing turns, but the statistical test showed no significant difference (Chi-square=0.68 (df1); p=0.4096) between the two groups. Thus male as opposed to female tutors had no effect on students' and the Tutor Gender Hypothesis in terms of initiative at turn taking level was also not supported.

To test the effects of tutor gender on students of different genders (H_1 (b)), the male and female students' discourse act participation in the male tutor-led and female tutor-led tutorials was compared and the results indicated that the male students had a higher frequency of discourse acts than female students in the male tutor-led tutorials, but in the female tutor-led tutorials female students used more discourse acts than the males, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Male and female student discourse acts (H_1(b))

Tutorials	*Student discourse acts*		
	Male students	*Female students*	*Total*
Male-led	187 (17.0)	46 (4.2)	233
Female-led	296 (14.1)	492(18.2)	788

The statistical result indicated a very significant difference (Chi-square=129.79 (df1);

Table 2: Students' discourse acts (H_1 (a))

Tutorials	*Counter-informs*	*Comm-ents*	*Elicits*	*Inform*	*Total: High-initiative acts*	*Reply-informs*	*Acknow-ledge*	*Total: Low-initiative acts*	*Total*
Male-led tutorials	7 (2.8%)	13 (5.1%)	8 (3.2%)	197 (77.9%)	225 (88.9%)	21 (8.3%)	7 (2.8%)	28 (11.1%)	253
Female-led tutorials	10 (1.3%)	28 (3.6%)	14 (1.8%)	658 (83.8%)	710 (90.4%)	53 (6.8%)	22 (2.8%)	75 (9.6%)	785

Table 4: Student turns in male-led and female-led tutor tutorials (H_1 (a))

Tutorials	*Self-selections*	*Allocations*	*Sequence`*	*Total initiative-bearing turns*	*Non-initiative-bearing turns*	*Total*
Male-led tutorials	45 (50%)	0 (0%)	39 (43.3%)	84	6(6.7%)	90
Female-led tutorials	113 (41.7%)	2 (0.7%)	128(47.2%)	243	28(10.3%)	271

p<0.0001) between the male and female students' discourse act participation in the male tutor-led and female tutor-led tutorials. The female students' mean values in the female tutor-led tutorials were four times higher than those of the female students in the male tutor-led tutorials. In the male tutor-led tutorials the male students also did better than the males in the female tutor-led tutorials. The Tutor Gender Hypothesis was therefore strongly supported with respect to student gender as the dependent variable in terms of discourse act participation.

With regard to discourse act initiative in the male tutor-led tutorial, the figures in Table 6 show that the male and female students in the male tutor-led tutorials showed initiative through all four high initiative discourse acts, even though the male students had higher percentages of these than the female students.

Statistical testing showed a strong tendency toward a significant difference (Chi-square= 3.67 (df1); p=0.0554) between the two groups with regard to initiative. This was largely because the male students used more counter-informs, comments and elicits and fewer reply-informs than the female students. The Tutor Gender Hypothesis was therefore supported with respect to discourse act initiative in the tutorials.

Also in the female tutor-led tutorials, the males and females used all four high-initiative discourse acts, but with slightly higher percentages for the female students in three of the four high-initiative discourse acts, as shown in Table 7.

However, the statistical test (Chi-square= 2.12 (df1); p=0.1454) indicated no significant difference between the two groups. This is largely because males and females used similarly large numbers of informs. The female students used a much higher percentage of reply-informs than males, but this was not enough to generate a significant overall result. The second part of the Tutor Gender Hypothesis therefore was not supported with respect to discourse act initiative in female tutor-led tutorials.

In terms of frequencies and proportions of male and female turns per student in male tutor-led and female tutor-led tutorials, the Chi-square result indicated a very significant difference (Chi-square=9.25 (df1); p=0.0024) between the male and female students. In male tutor-led tutorials, the male turns per student were higher than those of the females. In female tutor tutor-led tutorials, the female students' turns per student were higher than the male students' turns per student, thus confirming that the tutors tend to have more positive effects on students of the same gender.

The figures in Table 8 show that in male tutor-led tutorials the female students self-selected more than the male students. The latter, on the other hand, had twice as high a percentage for sequences. This implies that female students got more speech floor and the male students maintained it.

Table 6: Discourse acts in male-led tutorials (H_1 (b))

Students	*CI*	*C*	*E*	*I*	*Total: High initiative acts*	*RI*	*A*	*Total: Low initiative acts*	*Total*
Males	6 (3.2%)	10 (5.3%)	7 (3.8%)	148 (79.2%)	171 (91.5%)	10 (5.3%)	6 (3.2%)	16 (8.5%)	187
Females	1 (1.5%)	3 (4.5%)	1 (1.5%)	49 (74.3%)	54 (81.8%)	11 (16.7%)	1 (1.5%)	12 (18.2%)	66

Table 7: Discourse acts in female-led tutorials (H_1 (b))

Students	*CI*	*C*	*E*	*I*	*Total: High initiative acts*	*RI*	*A*	*Total: Low initiative acts*	*Total*
Males	3 (1.0%)	10 (3.4%)	5 (1.7%)	256 (86.5%)	274 (92.6%)	11 (3.7%)	11 (3.7%)	22 (7.4%)	296
Females	6 (1.2%)	18 (3.7%)	9 (1.8%)	402 (82.4%)	435 (89.1%)	42 (8.6%)	11 (2.3%)	53 (10.9%)	488

Table 8: Turns in male-led tutorials (H_1 (b))

Tutorials	*Self-selections*	*Allocations*	*Sequences*	*Total: Initiative-bearing turns*	*Total: Non-initiative bearing turns*	*Total*
Male students	21 (41.2%)	0 (0%)	29 (56.9%)	50 (98.1)	1 (1.9%	51
Female students	24 (61.5%)	0 (0%)	10 (25.6%)	34 (87.2%)	5(12.8%)	39

In female tutor-led tutorials, on the other hand, female students performed better than the males in self-selections, but in terms of sequences males had a higher percentage, as shown in Table 9. This further confirms that they interacted more with other participants over a succession of turns.

With respect to turn-taking initiative, the male students in male tutor-led tutorials used larger proportions of initiative-bearing turns and in female tutor-led tutorials this was the case with the female students. However, statistical testing indicated that these differences were not significant (Chi-square= 2.63 (df=1); p=0.1049) in male tutor-led or female tutor-led tutorials, although in the latter there is a tendency towards significance (Chi-square= 2.94 (df=1); p=0.0864). Overall, the second part of the Tutor Gender Hypothesis was therefore not supported with respect to turn taking initiative.

CONCLUSION

The Tutor Gender Hypothesis was explored in two parts. The first part considered the effects of tutor gender on the participation of students irrespective of gender, while the second part explored whether tutors had positive effects on students of the same gender than on students of the opposite gender.

The overall result of the first part of the Tutor Gender Hypothesis seems to suggest that students' participation effectiveness irrespective of their gender was not affected by the gender of the tutors. However, with respect to the effects of tutor gender on students of different genders, the findings indicated that the females' mean values for discourse acts in the female tutor-led tutorials were four times higher than those of the female students in the male tutor-led tutorials. The males' mean values also for discourse acts in the male tutor-led tutorials, on the other hand, were higher than those of the males in the female tutor-led tutorials. Also, in terms of turn participation, the male students' turns per student were higher than those of the females in the male tutor-led tutorials, while in the female tutor-led tutorials, the female students' turns per student were higher than those of the male students. The unequal numbers of males and females in the female tutor-led tutorials is an important factor which the earlier research did not accommodate.

In a large scale study, the gender imbalance would be better addressed by having all-male and all-female groups, and comparing them also with a set of equally balanced mixed-gender groups. Further research in this area could compliment mine by being more qualitative, involving more detailed interviews with tutors and also students in order to get more of an 'insider' perspective and arrive at a 'softer' description.

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Table 9: Turns in female-led tutorials (H_1 (b))

Tutorials	*Self-selections*	*Allocations*	*Sequences*	*Total: Initiative-bearing turns*	*Total: Non-initiative bearing turns*	*Total*
Male students	34 (31.5%)	0 (0%)	53 (49.1%)	87 (80.6%)	21 (19.4%)	108
Female students	80 (43.5%)	1 (0.5%)	82 (44.6%)	163 (88.6%)	21 (11.4%)	184

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