

All together now: Choral responses, gender and linguistic space in a Cameroonian primary classroom

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Abstract

Using Conversational Analysis (Jefferson, 2004) and Ardener's (2005) Muted Group Theory, this paper explores student contributions in an African classroom through the specific sociolinguistic lens of gendered linguistic space. The focus here is on one small primary classroom in the city of Bamenda, North West Province, Cameroon, and the embodiment of learning displayed by both boys and girls through the use of choral responses. Reflecting on an African classroom opens up understanding of what can occur in classroom lessons other than in the West and, as such, allows teacher educators in particular to consider ever-new ways of understanding classroom talk and the learning environment.²

Introduction

All students all over the world have a complex combination of countless contributing variables influencing spoken participation in classroom lessons, variables such as geographic location, culture, age, social class, personality, ethnic identity, religion and gender, all of which have impact on their educational experiences. Sociolinguists, discourse analysts, and educational researchers alike seek deeper and deeper understandings of classroom language in the quest for deeper understandings of spoken discourse and the relevance of language use to the learning experience. Using Conversational

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² My heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Lilian Lem Atanga at the University of Bamenda, Cameroon, for her insightful comments and her enthusiasm and support for this project.

Analysis (Jefferson 2014), Muted Group Theory (Ardener, 2005) as well as the notion of linguistic space (Jule, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010) in the West, this research explores African classroom data. Looking specifically at teacher/student discourse in a Cameroonian classroom brings to the fore in teacher education in Africa and elsewhere consideration of the traditional yet effective teaching method of choral responses. Often seen in the African context, choral responses have limited use in the West. In the classroom explored here, choral responses are used effectively to engage students -- embracing the embodiment of knowledge and learning through synchronized experiences.

Cameroon is a developing country; it is located in Central Africa, bordering the Bight of Biafra, between Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria, and along the Atlantic coast. A relatively stable and peaceful country until recently, its neighbours have experienced wars and much violence. Recently, schools in the Extreme [North region](#) of Cameroon have been impacted by the [Boko Haram](#) insurgency, which has spilled into border areas from neighboring [Nigeria](#). In January 2015, many schools in the Far North did not re-open after the Christmas vacation following the [December 2014 Cameroon clashes](#) (Umar, 2015). In December of 2016, the anglophone provinces (South West and North West) erupted into ongoing protests concerning the marginalization of Anglophones in the predominately Francophone country. These protests have meant the closing of most schools in the area while the tensions have yet to be resolved.

In contrast, my country, Canada, is an advanced and peaceful democratic country in the West. It enjoys a strong educational system. In fact, education is the highest priority for Canadians, second only to healthcare, in the governing provincial budgets. All Canadians graduating from Canadian schools receive the same credential: a provincial high school diploma; it is a very inclusive system and special efforts are made to keep it that way. Girls and boys are equally encouraged to excel. Its universities are open and accessible to those who meet the grade level requirements. Canadian education is well-funded, open and accessible to most citizens, even those in remote areas. The educational philosophy/method is child-centred and mainstreamed; meaning all students of all levels of abilities are included in the regular school system, and individualized educational plans are available for each student in the system. Class discussions and partner work are common. Resources and technology abound. Class size is capped at 25 – 28 students across the country. Critical thinking and independence of thought are of prime importance.

Cameroon's education system, in contrast, is spotty at best. Primary education is 'universal', even 'compulsory', but it is by no means accessible to all children, and even less so for girls. Most of the schools in the country were established by missionaries over the past two hundred years, principally the Roman Catholics in the French-speaking areas and Baptist and Presbyterian in the two Anglophone provinces. Recent changes have attempted improvements in the state school system, but investment in education is only 3% of the national budget. Education is grossly underfunded. Importantly, Cameroon is not a knowledge-based economy; most of its population live at subsistence levels, while multinational companies like Delmonte, Nescafe, and Exxon Oil extract wealth out of the country with corruption at every level of governance often taking the rest.

Education is a low priority in the county; this is evident in the overcrowding of schools, the lack and level of teacher education; lack of basic supplies or learning resources, and little to no maintenance of crumbling and over-crowded school buildings. Cameroonian cultural values and survival are based on kinship, with family loyalties trumping individual social advancement. Not all families can afford the costs of uniforms and school and/or examination fees, though the advantages to receiving an education are highly valued among the population.

Canada and Cameroon are very different indeed. This research focuses on the Cameroonian context through the lens of a Canadian researcher, attempting to locate and understand the pedagogy seen in Cameroonian classroom data in order to better understand classroom talk and how it influences learning and/or performing learning to students in various settings. Too little educational research pays attention to the Cameroonian context or to the African context in general. Over the years, I have spent time in a host of Cameroonian schools and have come to appreciate the strengths of the African system. Understanding the context is vitally important. The two countries cannot be compared. They can, however, speak to each other in fascinating ways when it comes to the search for teacher excellence valued all over the world.

Education in Cameroon

According to data available for 2011, only approximately 50% of all girls and 57% percent of all boys attend primary school in Cameroon. The low school enrolment rate is attributed to cost, with girls' participation further reduced by early marriage, sexual harassment, unwanted pregnancies, domestic responsibilities, and certain socio-cultural biases (U.S. Department of State, 2012). A 2006 government study found there is also a large gap between the capacity of the schools and the number of potential

students in Cameroon's North West province, where this study takes place. That government research showed that primary schools only had enough seats for less than 2 million students although more than 3 million attend schools (U.S. Department of State, 2007). Embezzlement of education funds is considered the main problem in primary education; half of the state primary schools in the Transparency International (2011) sample reported problems with their buildings: only 20% of schools have working toilets, 30% have access to a water tap, and barely 30% have enough tables and benches for students; in addition, there is high absenteeism of teachers and poor implementation and enforcement of rules and regulations that do exist.

The village schools in particular lack electricity, windows, lockable doors, running water, latrines, books, paper, pencils, scribblers, worksheets. There are no photocopiers, no coffee breaks for teachers, no lunch hours for students, no established or maintained school yards, and no access to technology. Weather can also affect classes: torrential rains during Rainy Season and high winds and dirt in Dry Season can interrupt lessons as well as affect attendance of both teacher and students. The classrooms are often bare, with only chalk, chalkboards and the desks as the resources available.

Traditional education in the North West province meant little more than that girls and women were 'fetching of wood and drawing of water. Family depended entirely on the soil. In harvest, men helped but, other times, the work was left entirely in the hands of women' (Elango, 1993, p. 1). As such, the trajectory of education in Cameroon has been quite different to that experienced in Canada. Cameroon's educational method, for example, is traditional teacher-centred and authoritative. The students are taught for the examinations; there are 3 examinations each Cameroonian child would need to succeed through the system: a primary level leavers certificate, an O-Level examination; and an A-Level examination. In addition, most Cameroonian teachers are not professionally educated.

Martha Egbe's (2009) work on mathematics classrooms in Cameroon explores the teaching methods used in schools. 'In the Cameroon classroom, the teacher possesses absolute power while the students are passive, fearing to give the wrong answers. In appreciating students' responses, teachers make utterances as "Ok, very good, alright", "let's begin solving", "don't do that," "don't talk, be quiet" (p. 5). In Cameroon, the traditional pedagogy is 'where teachers talk to all the children at the same time, demonstrating processes of solving problems on the chalkboard, while the students sit behind the desks listening and copying notes' (p. 14). Egbe explains that student learning in African classrooms in general 'is dominated by the teacher talking and writing on the board most of the time,

with little room for the students', a reality on which her own research on the teaching of mathematics was chiefly focused (p. 18). The major activity in the classroom involves teacher questions and the marking of homework irrespective of the subject. In her study, activities were made of closed questioning that did not facilitate the development of higher order thinking skills. As a result, not all students necessarily understood any given concept before the class would move on to the next lesson.

This pedagogical style could not be more different from Canadian classrooms where other teaching methods are regularly used, including informal lectures, inquiry-based learning, illustrations, demonstrations, games, expositions, discussions, group teaching and independent research often happen with some variety across any school day – or even lesson. As such, comparing classrooms in Canada and Cameroon is not easily done. There is too little in common. If education were a zero-sum game, Canada would 'win' and Cameroon would surely 'lose'. I, however, challenge this way of looking at success. For one, education and real learning have always been difficult to judge, especially when one considers the whole plethora of possible influences that go into the learning context. I am also of the opinion that the West has much to learn from Central/West African education if it would pay attention. Despite the lack of most daily comforts found in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, there are important gifts for the world that only African classrooms can offer. The use of choral responses in teacher-led lessons is an example of a method that has long been discarded in the West and yet may offer much in regards to student engagement in many respects – and in particular with girls contributions to their educational contexts.

Gendered Linguistic Space

Much of my research to date has been concerned with teacher methods and gendered use of linguistic space. My research over the years has explored how deeply subconscious teacher attitudes toward gender are and are revealed in speech patterns. Counting the words spoken by teachers and students has appeared to me as a meaningful way of understanding the classroom participants and possible meanings within class time. In primary classrooms, I have found evidence of different patterns and expectations of linguistic space in regards to teacher responses to girls and boys. In the early 2000s, I looked at one classroom in Canada in particular that revealed a clear and consistent pattern. During teacher-led lessons, the teacher would ask students questions as part of a usual IRF teaching/learning method used the world over. That is, I for initiate; R for response; F for feedback. Over 100 hours of classroom transcripts from a second grade class (seven year olds) revealed that the teacher used at least

80% of words used during lessons of this nature; boys and girls used up the remaining 20% of words spoken (Jule 2004). Of their 20% of linguistic space, boys used 10 times more words in a given lesson. Why would this situation be? The answers are surely complicated, but the evidence showed a distinct gendered pattern on the part of the teacher in privileging boys by speaking more words directly to them, such as: Teacher initiates (I) with a question (to boy or girl). If a girl puts up her hand and responds (R), the teacher follow-ups (F) with fewer words. For example:

Teacher: What is the capital city of Canada?

Girl: Ottawa.

Teacher: Yes. That's right.

But with a boy:

Teacher: what is the capital city of Canada?

Boy: Ottawa.

Teacher: Yes, That's right. Ottawa is the capital city of Canada. People think it's Toronto, but it's not.

When considered through a lens of linguistic space, the boy receives 17 words in feedback of the teacher in this instance; the girl receives only 3 words, approximately 6 times more for the boys over the girls. Other classrooms show similar patterns, revealing a likely subconscious sexism regarding the worth or significance of a student response regarding expectations of some kind of the teacher and the students themselves. This discrepancy may be worth paying attention to, particularly for teachers, teacher educators and sociolinguists who study discourse patterns in the quest to more deeply understand the human condition and societal expectations of gender performances.

Exploring Classroom Talk

Schools and classrooms are pervasive language environments, and this in and of itself is a fundamental reason for studying classroom talk. African scholar Elango (1993) says that the Cameroonian system “has not realized the English language as the main tool to learning and that students should be given ample opportunity to explore their field of studies with the language spoken locally” (p. 6). Classroom conversations are the central educational process or constitute major portions of it for most children anywhere (Adelman, 1981; Vandrick, 1999a, 1999b; Aries, 1997). One can consider the tremendous

amount of talk that all children encounter on a daily basis, thousands upon thousands of words, and the ways in which talk may be encouraging of or antagonistic toward their participation and, as a result, their learning.

Linguistic patterns that are systematically found to be largely used by one sociolinguistic group over another offer insights into education more widely understood. Specific and gendered language patterns used in classrooms are of particular interest in the larger gender and language debate. One of the themes running through much feminist pedagogical work is that classrooms can be sites of struggle—struggle to belong, struggle to matter, struggle to learn, struggle to speak aloud, and struggle to participate – and often passive struggles on the part of many girls. Such struggles may be because of the particular power relations within classrooms and that these struggles may be partly witnessed in a lack of speech or patterns of speech (that is, powerless participants say less than the more powerful participants). That girls may be ‘nice quiet girls’ who get their work done and do well with classroom behaviors is likely linked to cultural demands of gendered performances; hence, a different culture would surely present different results.

The possibility of silence belonging to the more powerless is one accepted in much feminist pedagogical work, although the context explored here suggest some further interpretations may be necessary. In documenting and understanding the speech patterns of the students in this study, I use the concept of linguistic space because I have found it useful. Researching British classrooms in the 1980s, Mahony (1985) found that it was ‘normal’ for a teacher to ignore girls for long periods of time, for boys to call out, and for boys to dominate classroom talk in addition to their dominating the classroom space in British classrooms. Many such classroom interactions resulted in boys taking more attention through a domination or use of space, either physical or verbal space. This use of space served as an encroachment on the girls’ space, both physical and verbal, in favor of the boys’ space. However, lessons in most African classrooms have teachers using a ‘transmission approach’ where the children remain passive; the lessons are “teacher centred with teachers asking questions and learners answering in chorus or, sometimes, individually and copying what is put on the chalkboard” (Ackers et al, 2001). Responding in chorus may present problems in searching for gendered speech tendencies, since all students participate together without gender as a standout feature. Or it may offer an enriching method of student engagement that is gender-neutral. This possibility matters greatly to feminist pedagogy.

Thornborrow's (2002) research also highlights the ways that many teachers control classroom participation through their 'teacher talk'. She sees teachers' speech as creating and maintaining asymmetrical power relationships by their talking more than their students. Teacher-led teacher-talk is often organized around Initiation/Response/Follow-up (I-R-F) exchanges, in which the teacher controls the group by controlling the dynamics of classroom discourse: it is the teacher who 'takes turns at will, allocates turns to others, determines topics, interrupts and reallocates turns judged to be irrelevant to these topics, and provides a running commentary on what is being said and meant' (p. 176). It is also argued by both Stanworth (1981) and Mahony (1985) that the implicit message to the students was that the extra attention given to male students in such exchanges suggested that boys were more interesting to the teacher. When applying this possibility to the I-R-F structure of many language lessons, the teacher initiates (I), but who is being prompted? Who responds (R)? And then how does the teacher follow-up (F)? These questions have propelled my ideas thus far. That said, the Cameroonian classroom presents important challenges to this. I did not find this gendered pattern in the classrooms I was part of in Bamenda. In fact, the teacher, Mrs. Abwa³, uses a traditional pattern of teaching found in many developing countries; that is, the teacher speaks and the students respond in chorus.

The Study

The Context

Collecting data from inside this Cameroonian school is no small matter. There are numerous cultural realities to consider. How do you go into a classroom, like the one I had access to in Bamenda, in Cameroon's North West province, with a video camera without causing a terrible distraction? Western researchers as well as Western tourists have long been chastised by the Cameroonians – and rightly so -- for exploiting them by such efforts to 'understand them'. Many have come to places like Cameroon out of a curiosity that helps the Westerner (whether it be for research, to offer humanitarian aid, or as a tourist adventure), with little in it for the Cameroonians themselves. What do they gain by being researched? And yet not engaging with African communities seems equally problematic – to not notice, nor care, nor find interesting the human experience around the world. In this way, relationships and trust are key to such research.

³ All names have been changed to protect confidentiality of all participants.

The seminal work done by Edwin and Shirley Ardener (Ardener E., 1960, 1996; Ardener, S. 1981, 1984, 2005) on the North West province of Cameroon is central in understanding the social history of the area. Their work records demographics, cartography, social customs, ways of life, diet, wages, divorce rates and more dating from their first arrival in Cameroon in 1955, described best in *Plantation and Village in the Cameroons* in 1960, to over more than fifty years of publications based on their early work. Their contributions cannot be underestimated when it comes to locating the history, issues and realities of the North West province, where this study is located. In addition, their ideas, especially Shirley Ardener's work on women in Cameroonian society, their visibility and/or being 'muted' have propelled other researchers to explore communities elsewhere, including those focused on gender and education. It was the Ardeners' early belief that compiling adequate population records is an 'essential basis' from which other work has emerged.

This study is located in the city of Bamenda, and was facilitated through cooperation with the Cameroon Baptist Convention (the CBC) that runs the primary school. For research purposes, I refer to the primary school as Joseph Merrick Primary School – or JM for short. I was able to connect with JM's headmistress, Mrs. Jaff, to discuss the aims and hopes of the study and its potential importance to Cameroonian teacher education. To secure consent of the parents and the students, Mrs. Jaff called a school meeting for all teachers, parents and students to explain the research and its intentions. Consent was given orally, since the literacy rates of the parents was, in many cases, too low to read and sign the consent from themselves.

Joseph Merrick Primary School is one of several schools run by the Cameroonian Baptist Mission. It sits in a residential area in Bamenda. There are six grades, with approximately 175 students. There are six classrooms, one small Headmistress office/resource room. There is a small sandy area on the edge of the school which the children use as their playground. There is no electricity nor running water. The surroundings look much like the other schools in the area. The headmistress, Mrs. Jaff, is a wife and mother of 3 who followed her husband to the United States while he completed his theology education to become a pastor in the area. She was well acquainted with Western education and had great ambitions for her students and valued the role education plays in the development of a community and of all the individuals involved – the teachers, the students, the families, the neighbours, etc. She was more than willing to give me access to her school classrooms; her pride in her school was clear,

and I too shared her view that the school was a good one considering the context. Her support of the research was crucial. The local authorities also fully supported the project.

I videotaped 30 hours of classroom lessons at JM in June of 2015. To help make my presence less problematic, a very small video recorder was used, almost the size of a mobile phone. While taping, I avoided looking through the camera while filming; instead, I placed the camera on a table top and sat away from it, watching the teacher and the students throughout the lessons rather than the camera. Collecting video data was most necessary, since transcribing of classroom discourse requires knowing who the speaker is (which an audio recording cannot discern). Video recording offered a rich audio track that helped with the transcriptions of classroom talk taken over the course of a few days.

Methodology

Conversational Analysis was used to both transcribe and to understand the data. Conversation Analysis (CA) demands that the researcher engage in a close relationship with texts or transcripts. According to Jefferson (2003), Conversations are understood to emerge from seemingly ‘mundane’ conversations of everyday social encounters. However, a burgeoning field of research within CA looks not at conversation *per se*, but in the interactions that occur within specific contexts such as the classroom (Hellermann, 2003, 2007; Markee, 2000). Through an examination of not just *what* is said but *how* something is said and *how* someone else orients to that which is said, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of an interaction. Sunderland (2004) reminds educational scholars, particularly those concerned with language learning, that if we gain insight into how talk shapes our positioning, we might become better educators.

In conversational analysis, speech choices can index particular institutional stances, ideologies and identities that are enacted in talk (Hertiage & Clayman, 2010, p. 18). Thus, in language classrooms, particular ways teachers and students talk is one aspect of how the institution of the classroom is realized or reproduced, and ‘talking in these ways is a part of being a teacher or a student, so that it is through speaking that these roles are constituted.

The Data: Mrs. Abwa’s Mathematics Lesson

Mrs. Abwa’s second grade classroom is the setting for the 15 minutes of classroom data discussed here. As the video clip opens, we see the Mrs. Abwa at the front of the room. She appears to be in her late twenties, early thirties. She has an easy smile, though she doesn’t smile too much while she teaches.

She is attentive to her class and uses a clear, well-projected voice. She is wearing a black, jersey dress; a gold watch, gold earrings; and jeweled flip-flop sandals. Such dress is the norm here in schools, which are semi-formal at all times. Female teachers wear dresses with lovely footwear; male teachers wear suits and ties. Mrs. Abwa is carrying a blue plastic whip in her hands, as well as chalk.

The floors are dirt floors, worn down with much use and damage often caused by rain; the walls are cement with faded paint. The classroom has no electricity at all, and the room is in disrepair. The entrance lacks a proper door and the windows are sealed only by worn-out wooden shutters. There is a worn poster of African animals on one wall and a yellowed poster of the alphabet on another, both attached with one screw each into the cement wall. The blackboard is made up of a portion of the worn cement wall painted over directly with black board paint and trimmed with a small wooden frame. The classroom is square, which is also typical for schools in the area – usually a collection of square rooms with no hallways per se; all the doors lead outside.

There are about 25 students in the room: 2 or 3 to a desk, 4 desks to a row; 3 rows and roughly 50% girls and 50% boys, though this was difficult to discern. The students wear school uniforms, which are green for Baptist schools in the country. The lesson takes place on a Monday morning. It is a Mathematics review class at Primary 2 level – seven year olds. The class takes place toward the end of the year, so it is important to understand the lesson as a review one in that the lesson is not so much about learning new concepts but reviewing ones already studied.

Analysis

At first glance, the classroom looks too impoverished for much learning to take place, but that impression would be false. The data reveals a teacher with an endearing teaching manner and rapport with the students, even if she is somewhat authoritative in a very African way. Mrs. Abwa keeps the energy high. She seems at ease with her students, uses their names at times and her own gentle assembling of students to stay in their desks when necessary. She carries her blue whip but only uses it once and only to tap a student to sit forward and pay attention. She uses the phrase “If I catch you talking” several times, usually with little effect, and the sentence never completes. What she might do if she catches them talking is not made clear. Of course, the students remain very chatty. Sometimes she finds it disruptive but not always. She seems to have control of her room, and the students seem at ease with her. I wonder too if her way of speaking is one recognized from their own homes. At two points in the lesson, she uses Pidgin, a language used in the area in most homes.

The lesson itself is quite scattered in that the lesson moves from ‘sets’ to addition to subtraction to geography to fractions all in the space of 16 minutes. It could be that the class is a ‘review’ class, since the footage is taken at the end of May, a time when schools begin to wind down for the summer break. In fact, this is likely a review class since she seems to expect her students to know definitions and concepts. But it is hard not to notice the lack of resources in the room. The pencils that are present were gifts from Canada. One boy in particular seems quite content to keep using it throughout much of the lesson. At one point, Mrs. Abwa asks him to stop writing, which he promptly does and returns to it in time. The word ‘Madam’ is used frequently. It is interesting to note that the lesson is in English and takes place in an English part of Cameroon, yet this French term is heavily used. It appears unremarkable to the teacher who, at one point, says “Don’t madam me yet”. Again, this might be a word that is part of Pidgin. In any case, it is a sign of respect, even if it is overly used. The students appear comfortable speaking in chorus.

Most lessons in most African classrooms have teachers using a ‘*transmission approach*’ where the children – both boys and girls - remain passive; the lessons are teacher centred with teachers asking questions and the students answering in chorus, sometimes, individually, and then copying what is put on the chalkboard (Ackers et al, 2001 in Egbe, 2009). We weren’t in the Cameroonian school very long before we realized that responding in chorus may present problems in searching for gendered speech tendencies, since all students participate together without gender as a standout feature -- students speaking in chorus lessens gendered interactions with the teacher. This possibility is not something well considered in current pedagogy, even feminist pedagogy that searches for ways to make classrooms gender friendly and affirming to all learners.

The notion of synchrony is perhaps much more helpful: that is the connection of what is said to what the body is doing, like singing or clapping. Research in psychology has found that the connection of shared singing can increase social bonding (Kreutz, 2014). The recent work of Pearce, Laundry and Dunbar (2015) was published in the Royal Society Open Science, “The Icebreaker effect: singing medicates fast social bonding”. Their research offers fresh ways of understanding the effectiveness of choral responses and singing and clapping that are seen in African classrooms regarding feelings of belonging to each other as social groups.

I did *not* find the gendered pattern I was looking for in the classroom. Mrs. Abwa uses the traditional pattern of teaching: the teacher speaks and the students respond in chorus, she uses singing and there's much choral clapping as well to affirm student success for each other, example, "Well done: clap, clap, clap."

Regarding the linguistic space breakdown, there were 2200 words spoken in this 16 minute transcription piece. Of this, the teacher spoke 1971 words (90% of all the words spoken); the students used the remaining 10% (224 words). Of their 224 words, 175 of them were spoken in chorus (all together) so that 78% of all student contributions were spoken like this. Interactions that generated responses from individual girls prompted the girls to speak 20% of the student words; single boys spoke only 9 words (4%) of the 45 student words spoken by a single student (boy or girl).

I believe the girls were speaking more freely in this Cameroonian classroom because of the use of choral responses – a method that offers more safety in less attention to individual contributions; the students are less conspicuous. The teacher's linguistic space matches other studies I have done studies in the West where the teacher often uses more than 80% of the words spoken during classroom lessons (Jule, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010); but here, where students respond in chorus, using a measurement of linguistic space fails to investigate gendered patterns of contributing to lessons because girls do not appear silenced in the same way. In the Canadian context, it was boys that spoke 10 times more than girls but the investigation here suggests it is the other way around: the girls spoke more. In fact, both boys and girls spoke more frequently in unison than alone. This observation does present the West with a challenge to its more individualized student responses. However, this raises the issue of individual level of engagement and progress of the pupils. I admit that, even with a consideration of choral language as an important pedagogic method too often overlooked by the West, choral responses can mask other realities including the issue of gifted children and a possible loss of voice and creativity. It is important, therefore, to see a variety of teaching methods as always necessary for various goals of teaching and learning.

There are fewer resources in Mrs. Abwa's classroom than would be found in most classrooms in the West, but she displays incredible energy and a strong sense of belonging to the room. I thought I would find linguistic space a helpful linguistic tool to help understand gender and voice in this classroom as I have found in various classrooms in the West, but I did not see this. In all likelihood,

the minimal contributions by some girls in classrooms around the world has more to do with teaching methods.

Who has been ‘muted’? Whose contributions have been silenced or prompted? Boys? Girls? This seems tricky to discern and more explorations are needed, but the search for ‘voice’ in classrooms gets more interesting and dynamic when choral and embodied learning are displayed by an entire group of mixed-sex classroom contexts.

Conclusion

I conclude with three possible lessons from the research:

1. A view that Sub-Saharan African teachers have little skill in engaging students is simply not fair nor correct. The class I witnessed displayed engaged learners and a skilled and caring teacher who offered a lot of herself. Resources may be lacking, but a good teacher is a good teacher and they can be found anywhere, regardless of the level of support or resources.
2. Conversational Analysis is a helpful tool in gaining understanding of what is going on in this classroom. In this case, CA allows us to see and hear teacher-student dialogues and a consistent use of choral responses in particular – as well as to see how these reflect the way the language identifies the roles (teacher-student) and how it orients the players in relation to the other. The teacher speaks in certain ways that prompt a ‘student response’.
3. Linguistic space was not very helpful in understanding this Cameroonian classroom because of the teaching-learning use of choral responses, including singing and clapping. These strategies mask gendered patterns. Sexism is surely present in the culture at large (seen in the few opportunities for girls and women to advance, for example), but this classroom seems more gender-neutral than many classrooms I have observed in the West. This is a rather interesting claim to make – that what is considered ‘old-fashioned’ and ineffective for learning in the West may well be a useful teaching strategy to enhance learning in Africa and elsewhere. For one, choral responses need no added resources in areas where there are none to be found. The skills of a good teacher in pacing the lesson and tuning in to her or his students, making meaningful prompts to lead the learning and using engaging techniques to connect them to themselves and each other as a group of learners seems more central.

I see clear differences here regarding teaching style and method. Cameroonian classrooms and Canadian classrooms are very different indeed. But, in being different, there are lessons to be learned regarding effective teaching, how not to 'gender' the class and how seeing students only as individual learners can come at the cost of social bonding and group learning. A choral response is certainly less threatening, less obvious. I have found the lens of linguistic space to be a powerful tool to use in understanding how classrooms are sites of gender rehearsals and performances of power and exclusion. However, I do believe that this research can point to its limited use in other locations where other teaching strategies are more effective and more practical. In this way, the search for universal excellence in teaching must always be attuned to local context and cultural understandings with an ever open mind to find good methods everywhere they can be found.

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