

**The Questioning Behavior of Males And Females in an Undergraduate  
Language Class**

by  
**Dorothy W. Thomas**

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THE QUESTIONING BEHAVIOR  
OF MALES AND FEMALES  
IN  
AN UNDERGRADUATE LANGUAGE CLASS

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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My findings revealed no differences between males and females on the types of questions they asked. Males, however, asked more questions overall than females.

This study offers suggestions for further research.

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This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my father, Utah Worthy.



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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Seeking help can be an adaptive proactive strategy that assists and enhances students' learning (Karabenick & Knopp, 1991). Among the many skills required for building and sustaining a community of inquiry, those associated with formulating, asking and responding to questions have a special place. Learners who respond to almost no information by requesting assistance from those who teach are more likely to achieve their learning goals. Such students are active and self regulating, yet not everyone would agree with these claims. Some argue that seeking assistance is contrary to the independence required for high levels of achievement. According to Johnson (1992), nonetheless, questioning is integral to developing metacognitive and reflective thinking. She contends that questioning requires students and teachers to reflect on their understanding. Upon reflection, it is likely that participants will discern changes and advancements in thinking. During the last decade, researchers have investigated students' help seeking strategies and have addressed the consequences and implications based on their examinations.

Dunkin and Biddle (1974) observe that questions provide information on how students adapt to and function within the learning environment. Moreover, many teachers perceive student questioning to be critical to successful participation.

Although there are many studies of questioning in elementary and middle schools (Dillon 1981; Good et al., 1987; 1988; van der Meij, 1986, 1988, 1990), there are few investigations that address questioning in college classrooms. Researchers who have addressed this phenomenon (Dunkin & Biddle, 1974; Rosenshine 1976; Winne 1979) have focused primarily on teachers' questions rather than on students' questions.

For a long time, educators have requested additional research on students' questions (Barker, 1974; Gall, 1970; Hunkins, 1976; Sadker and Cooper, 1974). Lately, investigators have devoted more empirical attention to this topic (Dillon, 1982a; 1986; Darling, 1989; Gall, 1984; Good 1981; van der Meij, 1988). Two researchers, Karabenick and Sharma (1991), have expanded the few studies of college classroom questioning, developing a structural model that describes the antecedents of questioning likelihood. This model includes the following:

1. students' awareness of comprehension inadequacy, i.e., confusion.
2. students' having a question to ask

3. students' perceived reprisal for seeking help from the teacher.

Addressing linguistic behavior in the classroom, Perez (1986) identifies questioning as "the quintessential aspect of teaching" (p. 63). Other researchers perceive questions as critical elements of students' learning repertoire (Andersen & Nussbaum, 1990; Dillon, 1981). Postman and Weingartner (1969) note, "The art and science of asking questions is the source of all knowledge. Any curriculum of a new education would, therefore, have to be centered around question asking" (p. 89).

The aim of the present study, therefore, is to investigate and document, in an exploratory and descriptive approach, one aspect of the linguistic behavior of males and females. More definitively, this study examines the questioning behavior of males and females in an undergraduate Speech Communication class.

The ability to ask competent questions in the classroom includes both sociolinguistic knowledge and pragmatic factors related to language use. Language learners who have access to these strategies can adjust more quickly to new classroom environments in which questioning takes place.

Existing literature shows that males and females differ in their participation rates and competencies. These

differences can sometimes impair accurate evaluation; therefore teachers and students should understand that the classroom communication system is occasionally a problematic medium.

While educational researchers agree on the importance of spoken language in the classroom, they do not agree on how to study it. Regardless to how researchers examine spoken language, their studies of verbal behavior in the school environment should try to answer many educational questions (Cazden, 1986). A study of students' questioning behavior in a language class, where there is much interaction, is one means of answering some of these questions.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Although there are many studies on classroom interaction in science and math classes, (Brooks, 1982; Brophy, 1985; Clarricoates, 1983; Dillon, 1994), there are few studies that center on classroom interaction, specifically questioning and gender differences, in the language class. In the past, researchers have described female language as tentative, hesitant, immature, emotional, hyperformal and nonassertive, a language that suggests insecurity. Women supposedly:

1. ask more questions.
2. explain and qualify their statements (using words like "rather" and "kind of").

3. assume more yielding and less assertive roles (Kramer, 1974).

Some researchers have characterized male language as assertive, adult and direct, a language that suggests power. Kramer's study (1974) reflects the stereotype of men speaking assertively, briefly, profanely, and women using diffident sentences and flowery phrases. Romaine (1994) believes that the pattern of sex differentiation is so inescapable in Western societies that an investigator can examine women's speech to learn which forms carry prestige and men's to discover which forms are stigmatized.

Some early research (Lakoff, 1975) claimed that women use more tag questions, ["It is a beautiful day, isn't it?"]. A few of the researchers perceived these questions typical of the greater hesitancy of women, who feared affirming ideas without qualification. Associated with women speech during early research and even today is the use of high tone at the end of an utterance. Sometimes when women have spoken declaratively, the tone of their voice has suggested they were asking questions. This feature suggests, to some researchers, women's tentativeness and lack of confidence in putting forth their viewpoints. According to Romaine (1994), such thought is circular. In other words, some researchers characterize women

as lacking in confidence because they use tag questions, and others assert that a lack of confidence describes women who use tag questions. In examining these claims, some have found (Romaine, 1994), that men use more tag questions than women. Although the linguistic behavior of men and women is similar, no one has said that men might be lacking in confidence because of their speech behavior. If researchers take men's speech as the yardstick for comparison, then women's speech becomes secondary, a phenomenon which investigators should explain. How investigators form their research questions, nonetheless, has a bearing on the findings.

Romaine (1994) claims that researchers have measured women's speech behavior against male norms and have regarded the behavior "deficient" and "deviant." She observes, too, that not too long ago researchers believed that something was 'wrong' with working class speech, Black speech, etc. Weighing these factors and those cited earlier, there is a need for a study that examines and characterizes the questioning behavior of black females in an undergraduate speech class.

### **Rationale and Significance**

Questioning is the focus of many studies in several different contexts involving varied relationships. Among these relationships are friendships, husband and wife relationships,



family gatherings, service encounters, business affiliations, doctor-patient relationships, lawyer-client relationships. In education, however, there are few studies on questioning, and the ones that exist focus primarily on teacher questioning behavior rather than students.'

An examination of students' questioning is particularly important. It is significant because teachers in American classrooms give students the directive to ask questions. To participate competently in this interactive process, students must be able to interpret what is going on around them (Mehan, 1979). This includes knowing the appropriate time to ask questions and make comments. The challenge for the teacher is to provide meaningful experiences in the classroom to generate student questions about the learning. Teachers should also attempt to elicit questions that require synthesis in thinking. If schooling is to help students become more self-reliant and self directed, then it seems vital that researchers explore the types of questions that students ask.

Some argue that the classroom is a small society with its own values, its own rules, and above all, its own language; if this is the case, it would be enlightening to explore the use of questions in a language class, notably a Speech class, where the context has a specialized structure with its own

ritualistic form. Because a Speech class is structured and oral communication is central, a study of the interaction in a language class is significant.

As noted earlier, most of the earlier classroom research focused on math and science classes. These studies revealed that males do better academically than females. Research has failed to address the language class where females appear to have an advantage and where they have shown assertiveness. Many would say that females might do better in the Speech class because of their tendency to externalize their thoughts; there are others, however, who would resist the notion that females are always verbalizing their thoughts. In language classes, which I have taught, females have been as assertive, vocal, focused and inquisitive as their male counterpart. Additionally, females seem to have a fascination with the language and to pick up on its many nuances readily. Appearances can be deceiving, however. Professors cannot teach effectively while critically analyzing linguistic behavior from a researcher's point of view, a justification for the present study.

An educator, I am interested in the classroom centered research that explores interactions of black male and female students. This study intrigues me because no studies focus on

this population in this context. Though there is a study of the questioning behavior of Chinese students in American graduate level classrooms (Portin, 1993), there is not a study that examines the questioning behavior of black males and females in the undergraduate language class.

Lakoff (1975) discusses women's and men's socialization. She observes that as children, women are encouraged to be "little ladies"; that is, girls should not scream as vociferously as little boys nor should they throw tantrums. She argues that society tolerates stronger means of expression in little boys, but expects docility and resignation from little girls. Graddol and Swann (1989) observe that teachers often encourage the good speech and linguistic conduct of girls while tolerating rowdy linguistic behavior from boys.

Some authors challenge the popular notion of a homogenous woman's communication style determined simply by differences between women's and men's socialization (Tannen, 1990). They conceive women's language as multidetermined, shaped, and constrained as much by the gender power dynamics of the dominant culture as by the rules for women's speech within specific racial/ethnic groups (Henley & Kramarae, 1994).

Not many studies have examined whether a student asks questions. Furthermore, not many investigations have explored

why one gender asks more questions and/or responds to teachers' queries during classroom interaction. There is, consequently, a need for research that examines types of students' questions with a focus on gender differences. Additionally, since there are no studies on the questioning behavior of males and females in an undergraduate language class of a historically black university, an investigation is long overdue.

Having taken a course in Sociolinguistics and having read John Gray's (1992) best seller, Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus, I have had an ongoing interest in the differing linguistic behavior, specifically questioning behavior of males and females in the classroom. Andersen and Nussbaum (1990) have said, "No instructional communication researcher [sic] has been published that explores the use of questions as a speech phenomenon within the classroom" (p. 307). Recent communication research has responded to this concern (Pearson & West, 1991). Pearson (1991) has done a study on student questioning in college classrooms and the effects of teacher immediacy and biological sex.

The purpose of this study is to characterize and record, objectively and descriptively, the questioning behavior of black males and females. I will do this through a comparative

analysis of male/female interaction in an undergraduate language class.

In studying linguistic behavior in a classroom, one cannot ignore students' inherent discourse. Heath (1983) believes that not only does the school's rules of discourse shape the language of a classroom, but also the students' inherent rule of discourse. She argues that students' native cultures and/or socioeconomic backgrounds affect classroom discourse. Students in the present investigation are from the middle/upper middle socioeconomic class. Their verbal behavior is comparable to discourse of the language class, a factor likely to have a bearing on types of questions they ask. Students may ask questions for many reasons, i.e., explanation, information, clarification, confirmation, corroboration of the content, or for a diversion. They may also ask questions on different cognitive levels to expand their thinking, i.e., knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation. For whatever reason students ask questions, teachers should respond appropriately to increase student learning. Why should this study be of interest? An examination of students' questioning behavior is important for many reasons. First, this investigation will provide theoretical and practical information for teachers (West, 1991). Reid and Westbury

(1988) state, ". . . education is replete with 'theory' that seems to have no clear starting point in a vision of what the classroom might be" (p.x). This study interprets the results with both theory and practice in mind, a "composite" approach encouraged by Reynolds (1971).

Secondly, this investigation avoids the use of self-report research. Self-report assessments of student behavior are inadequate for many reasons. First, the assessment is highly subjective (Sanders & Wiseman, 1990). Secondly, social desirability shades student perception (Babbie, 1989). Social desirability assumes that whenever an investigator asks participants for information, the subjects present responses through filters to make themselves look good. An alternative to a self report is the observing and coding of overt teacher and student behavior (West, 1991). I have incorporated direct observation into the present study to provide a more significant analysis of classroom life (Hartman, 1982).

Thirdly, exploring the significance of students' questions in a language class provides a valuable means of testing current theoretical assumptions. The study's findings will make a contribution to the emerging field of gender differences and questioning behavior.

This investigation uses qualitative data within a self-contained classroom in an institution of higher learning. The study will yield data unavailable in previous studies.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The Review of the Literature consists of relevant literature in the following areas:

1. Language and Gender
2. Gender and Education
3. Female/Male Interaction in the College Classroom
4. Questioning Behavior of Males and Females in the Classroom
5. The Use of Questions in the Speech Communication Classroom

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### Language and Gender

Do women and men speak differently? Do children speak differently from adults? According to Holmes (1992), "English speakers are often not aware that the answer to both these questions is almost certainly 'yes' for all speech communities" (p. 165).

The notion of stable and mutually exclusive gendered speech styles solely associated with women and girls or men and boys is unfortunately still pervasive in the field of linguistics (Tannen, 1990b; Labov, 1991; Fromkin & Rodman, 1993). Many stereotyped conclusions about female and male speech originated with variationist studies carried out in the 1970's and early 1980's (Hirschman 1973, 1994; Fishman 1978,



1980). From recent work on same-sex conversational exchanges (Coates, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1996; Holmes, 1993) and work that focuses on previously understudied populations (Coates & Cameron, 1988; Goodwin, 1990, 1994; Morgan, 1991), researchers cannot unproblematically transfer the results. They cannot make generalized conclusions about speech types of all women or all men in all contexts (Holmes, 1986) based on cross-sex studies and works that investigated only white speakers living in the West.

Not surprisingly, there is conflicting evidence of sex differences in language development even during infancy. Some prior studies argue that girls, on the average, learn to use language earlier than boys. McCarthy (1954) summarizes the studies of language development before 1954 and finds small differences, but the dissimilarity usually favors girls.

In studies that Donelson and Gullahorn (1977) reviewed, some investigators report that female infants spontaneously vocalize more than males in the early weeks/months of life (Gatewood & Weiss, 1930; Goldberg & Lewis, 1969; Moss, 1967). For children, both male and female, ages 2-6, questions have been as little as 11% of their conversations to as much as 22% (Boyd 1926). Davis (1932) analyzed more than 3,600 questions that 73 children, ages 3 to 12 asked. One of her major