ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

Investigating the gendering of foreign language education

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OUTLINE

1. Research literature
2. Methodology – linguistic ethnography
3. Researcher as participant
4. School space
5. Perspectives on language learning
6. Ethnography in education – what can it tell us?
Boys unwilling to learn languages

By Sean Coughlan
BBC News education reporter

BBC News, 2005

Are women really better at learning languages?

The Telegraph, 2014

Boys' And Girls' Brains Are Different: Gender Differences In Language Appear Biological

ScienceDaily.com, 2008

Leaving Cert girls top boys in 25 of 32 subjects at higher level

Girls more reluctant to take on science, technology, engineering and mathematics

The Irish Times, 2015

Boys still bottom of class for languages

Irish Independent, 2010
‘[m]ention or discussion of the phenomenon of the gendering of foreign-language learning in the education system within the country (…) comprising the decreasing numbers of males taking languages, presenting for language assessment at the higher levels and achieving higher grades, is conspicuously absent.

(Murphy 2009: 92)
PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Links to social class & ‘academically-oriented’ students (Carr and Pauwels 2006) – the ‘future self’ (Dörnyei 2009)

The embodiment & realisation of gendered expectations – Girls perceived to be quiet, still, diligent & hardworking (Carr and Pauwels 2006)

Hegemonic masculinity is enacted through the body through sport and physical activity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) – boys ‘can’t sit still’ (Carr and Pauwels 2006)

Girls and women popularly thought to ‘do language’ better than men (Cameron 2003) & conversely men and boys are thought to ‘do STEM’ better

Gender-gap in language education may be seen as ‘how things are’ (Carr and Pauwels 2006)

Gender and foreign language education remains vastly understudied
Linguistic ethnography is a ‘topic-oriented’ approach to data collection (Swann and Maybin 2008; Shaw, Copland and Snell 2015)

Studies ‘aspects of everyday life and cultural practices of a social group’ (Shaw et al 2015: 7)

Distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic is ‘artificial’ (Blommaert & Jie 2010: 8)

‘Bricolage’ of conceptual frameworks (Rampton, Maybin & Roberts 2015: 36)

Focus on socially-mediated & interactionally-achieved identity processes in ‘sociocultural linguistics’ (Bucholtz and Hall 2005)

Allows for the study of language ideologies, which shape language education & outcomes & which are inseparable from individual and group identity (Pavlenko & Piller 2001; Kroskrity 2004)
Co-educational school located in a west of Ireland village
- Catholic-ethos, overseen by Catholic trust
- English medium instruction
- 20 mins. approx. from a Gaeltacht & from an urban area
- Ethnically homogenous
- Foreign language options: French or German
## PARTICIPANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>No. of students</th>
<th>No. of teachers</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1-2 interviews per participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom observation</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Twice weekly over six months: 2 x French class, 1 x German class</td>
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Attempts to **integrate** and participate in community life

**Ciara and Sarah** - ‘marginal individuals’ (Eckert 1989: 31) essential in ethnographic approaches for researcher integration and legitimacy within the community

Student-led/semi-structured interviews

"I don't like Facebook though 'cause (...) there's all these you know those kinda kids in school, like the popular groups, and there'll all just bein’ really stupid on it and it’s just like ‘seriously, Facebook is to like talk to people that you can't phone ‘cause they’re in a different country” – Ciara

**RESEARCHER AS PARTICIPANT**
Boys and girls use space differently in St. Murtagh’s:

Boys and girls infrequently sit together in class

Boys optimise use of space in schoolyard and play areas

Boys **have more regular and frequent use** of sports facilities

Space and built environment – repercussions for life chances and is self-reinforcing (Kuhlmann 2013)

**GIRLS, BOYS, AND SPACE**
James, 14 years, 2nd year, student of German.

JM  (...) I think it might be a requirement to get into certain colleges, a language, a foreign language.

James  Yeah you have to have three languages I think.

JM  And is that a factor for you then? Do you want to go to college and stuff?

James  I do yeah, but I would nev- I wouldn’t want to go into like teaching or something like that (...)
• James **indexes through adequation** (Bucholtz and Hall 2005) foreign language study at university with language teaching

• Male language teachers are underrepresented in secondary schools

• In a STEM-oriented neoliberal economy, teaching is less prestigious than James’ preferred career choice, computer programming

• Intersection of meta-linguistic discourse and gendered discourse
Jack, 15 years old, 3rd year, student of French.

(...) if you had a choice in [the] Leaving Cert, you’d-we I’d drop it anyway (unintelligible).

It depends on the type of person is like, if they’re into, like, something like Sciences and Maths or something’ or they’d be into languages like.

But like if I could I’d drop it.
• Jack reproduces and **authenticates** (Bucholtz and Hall 2005) the popular belief that there are ‘language people’ and ‘science people’

• Also reproduces notion of domain exclusivity and irreconcilable disciplinarity

• Paralleling of subject binary with gender binary

• Subject binary is legitimized, & mapped onto gender binary and vice versa
ETHNOGRAPHY IN EDUCATION – WHAT CAN IT TELL US?

1. Emic, or students’ own perspectives
2. Researcher can become participant, and in-group member, in a community with pre-defined roles
3. Theorises the social practices and functioning of a community
4. Contextualisation, not generalisation, of practices
5. Insight into the way in which gender is ‘done’:
   (a) Across a particular community
   (b) Across modes e.g. language, discourse, embodied practices
6. Theoretical connections between the embodiment of gender in the school yard and in the classroom, and the discursive construction of gender and other identities