Feminism, poststructuralism and feminist pedagogy

Kyoko Ide

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Professor Graham Crookes

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Introduction

The words “feminism” and “feminist” certainly seem to invoke various images in people. The phrase, “I’m not a feminist, but…,” uttered somewhat apologetically, is often heard when women discuss “women’s issues.” As the Third Wave (“new generation”) feminists Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards put it, “some people choose to stay away from feminism because they don’t want to be associated with spooky stereotypes about feminists” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 62).

Moreover, women’s issues remain politically subordinate to the “public issues” in discourses and texts defined and regulated by men (Luke, 1992). Pateman argues:

the discourse of democratic, equal and public communication is based on the presumption that the public is the political within civil society which historically excludes the personal-private-domestic. In this symmetrized division, in which only one side of the equation rules both, only the concerns of the ruling public domain are open for political and rational debate, and are constituted as common concerns of humanity and of the community (cited by Luke, 1992, p. 39).

Feminist pedagogy appears to remain unknown to most educators including those in the field of ES/FL. Whether this is because of its “feminist” label or its approach related to “women’s issues” is not clear. However, feminist pedagogy, especially its poststructuralist strand, has much to offer in providing a framework for language education. In this paper, I will
first provide a brief overview of various feminist theories, and discuss feminist pedagogy based on those theories. I will then discuss some poststructural critiques of mainstream feminism, and the application of poststructural feminism to feminist pedagogy. Finally, I will briefly touch on the implication of feminist pedagogy for ES/FL pedagogy.

Feminism overview

Feminism is a politics and also a theory, or rather a range of theories (Weedon, 1997). Feminism now, as in the past, has a variety of widely differing approaches. However, in spite of this diversity, feminism is often represented as a single entity that is somehow concerned with “equality”. Even though there is a growing awareness of and potential audience for feminist ideas, feminist thought is little understood (Beasley, 1999; Luke, 1992).

Feminist pedagogy, the main concern of this paper, is also not a single entity. Various strands of feminism lead to different approaches of feminist pedagogy. In discussing feminist pedagogy, therefore, I find it crucial to touch on the feminist theories. I would first like to start with clarifying the basic approaches of feminist theories.

There are mainly three traditions of feminism: liberal feminism, radical feminism, and Marxist/socialist feminism. In addition to those three traditions, psychoanalytic feminism appeared in 1970s and gained popularity in the 1980s. From the 1980s and 1990s, many

The most widely known form of feminist thought is *liberal feminism*. Liberal feminism concerns equality with men in the public area. It aims to gain full equality of opportunity for women in all aspects of their lives. Liberal feminism does not attempt to radically transform the existing social and political system but rather tries to assimilate women into the public spheres. It is thus considered to be the “moderate” or “mainstream” face of feminism (Beasley, 1999; Weedon, 1997).

*Radical feminism*, on the other hand, challenges the liberal stance towards the public world of men. Radical feminism envisions transforming the existing social order to one in which women will not be subordinated to men, and femininity and femaleness will be valued (Weedon, 1997). Radical feminism pays attention to women’s shared oppression as women, which leads to emphasizing the sisterhood of women. Radical feminism tends to focus on the politics of the private sphere, particularly focusing on sexuality, motherhood and the body (Beasley, 1999). The agenda of radial feminism is “to counter women’s supposedly natural, biological, inferiority and subordination within patriarchal society by asserting their at least equal (or superior) status in relation to men: a crucial aspect of that agenda is for women to gain control
over their own bodies/biology and relatedly to value and celebrate women’s bodies” (Beasley, 1999, p. 58).

Marxist/Socialist feminism sees class system as the source of oppression and ultimately of all inequalities (Beasley, 1999, p. 60). In this view, sexual oppression is viewed as a dimension of hierarchical class relations, and gender as socially produced and historically changing. Thus, Marxist/Socialist feminists aim for a full transformation of the social system (Beasley, 1999; Giroux, 1991; Weedon, 1997).

Psychoanalytic feminism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s through the works of feminists applying psychoanalytic theory to understand how women and men acquire gendered subjectivity. While French feminists took on the theory by Jacques Lacan, North American feminists are heavily influenced by Freud, and have paid attention to the importance of psychology and the formation of gendered identity (masculinity and femininity) by analyzing the impact of women’s primary care-giving responsibilities (mothering) on personality and social relations. In psychoanalytic feminism, women are seen as positively contributing an alternative psychological order (nurturance, care, cooperation, etc). While liberal feminists emphasize women’s capacity to take on many of the activities or qualities associated with men, Freudian feminist such as Nancy Chodorow stress the advantage of men developing nurturing, emphatic characteristics. Chodorow, in common with other writers in this grouping like Carol Gilligan and Sara Ruddick,
offers an emphasis on and celebration of “women’s fundamentally different sense of self,” a “unique female voice.” For Chodorow, difference between the sexes is formed out of inequitable social arrangements—women’s unequal responsibility for nurturing—and yet is seen as offering possibilities for a better world (Beasley, 1999, p. 68). Feminist philosopher Nel Noddings (1984), espousing for “the ethics of care,” for example, could be said to fit in this strand of feminism.

The three traditional strands, liberal, radical and Marxist/socialist feminisms as well as psychoanalytic feminism (and postmodern/poststructural feminism that I will discuss later) show the theoretical diversity of feminism. In addition, there are varying internal theoretical debates within these strands, and debates about feminists’ current perceptions of theoretical gains, impasses, and “backlash” (Luke, 1992). As Beasley (1999) puts it, “there can be no final answer to the question ‘what is feminism?’” (p. 117). However, the general stance of feminist thought involves a critical response to traditional theorizing from women’s experiences that challenges assumptions of male supremacy/centrality (Beasley, 1999, p. 117). Weedon (1997) summarizes feminism as follows:

Starting from the politics of the personal, in which women’s subjectivities and experiences of everyday life become the site of redefinition of patriarchal meanings and values and of resistance to them, feminism generates new theoretical perspectives from which the dominant can be criticized and new possibilities envisaged. Recent feminist theory, like its historical precursors, has developed through a critique of the patriarchal values and interests informing
existing social theories. Feminism questions the assumptions about women which social theories posit as true, pointing to their irrelevance to women’s experience or highlighting the frequent absence of women from them. The last twenty-five years have seen various attempts to systematize individual insights about the oppression of women into relatively coherent theories of patriarchy based on specific definitions of femaleness and femininity (pp. 5-6).

Feminist pedagogy

How, then, would a pedagogy based on feminism look like? Much of feminist pedagogy is based on the traditional strands of feminism and psychoanalytic feminism. In addition, feminist pedagogy has been largely influenced by critical pedagogy (also sometimes known as radical, emancipatory or liberatory pedagogy) (Vandrick, 1994). This makes sense considering the critical nature of feminism. However, feminism, especially poststructural feminism, challenges some of the assumptions of critical pedagogy, or rather “offer[s] complicating and refining critical pedagogy” (Benesch, 2001). In this section, I would first like to discuss the “mainstream” or “traditional” feminist pedagogy that is strongly related to critical pedagogy. Then, I will go on to discuss the criticism against such feminist pedagogy from the standpoint of poststructural feminism.

Empowerment and Voice

Empowerment is the concept that comes up most in feminist pedagogy, and is
considered to be achieved through students’ “coming to voice” or “finding one’s own voice” (Vandrick, 1994). This comes from the critical pedagogy that calls for the transformation of reality through a consciousness of one’s social position through the articulation of one’s voice (Orner, 1992, p. 78). Thus, much of feminist pedagogy is concerned with creating environments in which women can “come to voice, see themselves as constructors of knowledge in an atmosphere of psychological safety that emphasizes connection and relationship, and appreciate their learning experiences as women” (Tisdell, 1998, ¶6).

Other characteristics of feminist pedagogy can be seen in the suggested classroom practice such as: providing equal time for women and men; respecting women’s ways of learning; keep the class “women centered” by always using female pronouns first, etc (e.g. Vandrick, 1994). In addition, those who have been strongly influenced by Freudian feminism advocate the role of a feminist teacher as a mother (e.g. Schenke, 1996) and propose to create a classroom where caring/sharing is valued. Strong influence from liberal, radical, and psychoanalytical feminism is evident in such feminist pedagogy.

Poststructural feminism’s critique of critical/feminist pedagogy

In contrast to much of feminist thought, feminists who have taken up poststructuralist themes reject universalized and normalizing views of women as a group (such as, all women are
either the same as the views that men or have a unique voice). Poststructural feminists argue that universalism marginalizes that which is viewed as dissimilar or non-conforming (Beasley, p. 81). Poststructural feminists attempt to take into consideration the varying social constructs that make up each person’s identity, rather than collapsing all of those characteristics into the generic category of woman (Ropers-Huilman, 1998, p. 12).

Poststructural feminists object to the notion of unitary and rational individuals, arguing instead for the concept of subjectivity. For instance, Weedon (1987) defines subjectivity as “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (p. 32). In this view, a person’s identity (subjectivity) is seen as “precarious, contradictory, in process, constantly reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak” (Weedon, 1987, p. 32).

This concept of subjectivity appears to be useful and liberating to poststructural feminists. The repudiation of the fixed self means that gender is not fixed, thus challenging gender essentialism (Francis, 1999; St. Pierre and Pillow, 2000). It frees us from essentialist binary dichotomies of masculine/feminine, and enables us to argue that there is no essential “femaleness” (Soper, 1990; Huges, 2000).

Such stance of poststructural feminism has brought about criticisms of feminist pedagogy based on the traditional strands and psychoanalytical (Freudian) feminism as well as
critical pedagogy. In particular, poststructural feminists have questioned the notion of the
students’ “voice.” The “voice” defined by feminist pedagogy (and much critical pedagogy)
presupposes a unified, fixed, and rational subject who is “fully conscious” and “fully speaking”
(Ellsworth, 1989, p. 316) and capable of equal and normative reasoning. Poststructural
feminists argue that such a notion of students’ voice does not adequately recognize the multiple
social positions, multiple voices, conscious and unconscious pleasures, tensions, desires, and
contradictions which are present in all subjects, in all historical contexts (Orner, 1992, p. 78).
The specific context of the classroom affects the students’ voices uttered (or un-uttered) there.
Orner (1992), thus, goes on to say that it seems impossibly naïve to think that a genuine sharing
of voices in the classroom exists (p. 80). In poststructural feminism, voice is what teachers and
students “fashion” rather than find, as they produce relevant experiences to shape a narrative of
an emerging self (Tetreault, p. 177)

Poststructural feminists also oppose critical/feminist pedagogy’s notion of empowerment
and conception of power. This is largely influenced by Foucault’s analysis of power. Foucault
described power as:

never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as
commodity or a piece of wealth. Power is exercised through a net-like
organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they
are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this
power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the
elements of its articulation (cited by Francis, 1999, p. 383)
This theorizing views power as “exercised” rather than exchanged (Benesch, 2001, p. 59). Gore (1992) criticizes that much of critical and feminist pedagogy perceives power as property that is given and shared by students. Orner (1992) suggests that educators and educational theorists need to discard such conceptions of power and shift focus to notions of power as productive and present in all contexts, regulating all discourses and social interaction (p. 82). By conceiving of power as such, Gore (1992) proposes that the teachers should exercise their power in order to help students exercise their power.

Moreover, poststructural feminists problematize the “binarism” (Orner, 1992, p. 83) of seeing teachers as “empowerers” and students’ as “oppressed.” They argue that such binarism could lead to the illusion that the feminist teachers are already empowered and enlightened and that they never oppress the students (Gore, 1992; Orner, 1992). It could foster in the teacher arrogance that could lead to the eventual overlooking of reflexivity that is integral to critical practice (Gore, 1992). Gore (1998) suggests what Foucault calls “hyper and pessimistic activism” (cited by Gore, 1998, p. 281). The “pessimism” is “appropriately humbling attitude that avoids the arrogance of presuming to have ever arrived at some final destination” (Gore, 1998, p. 281). Teachers should be “constantly questioning the “truth” of their/our own thought and selves (Gore, 1992, p. 69). Gore suggests that the energies of teachers should be directed at seeking ways to exercise power toward the fulfillment of our aims, in ways that include humility,
skepticism and self-criticism.

In incorporating poststructural feminism to pedagogy, the key concept appears to be *positionality* (Tetreault, 2004; Tisdell, 1998). Positionality means that important aspects of our identity (e.g. gender, race, class, age, etc) are markers of relational positions rather than essential qualities and that their effects and implications change according to context (Tetreault, 2004, p. 172). Positionality helps us to see the multiple ways in which the complex dynamics of difference and inequality, which come from outside society, also operate powerfully inside the classroom itself (p. 177). Thus, Tetreault (2004) suggests:

Each student brings to your classroom a particular positionality that shapes his or her way of knowing. Your challenge as a teacher is to interweave the individual truth with course content into complex understandings that legitimate students’ voices. This relational knowledge…has the potential to help students analyze their own social, cultural, historical, political, and economic contexts (p. 183).

Similarly, Orner (1992) maintains that the energy of the teacher should be directed toward the possibility of “an attempt to recognize the power differentials present and to understand how they impinge upon what is sayable and doable in that specific context” (p. 80).

Curriculum development and feminist phase theory

Woodman (1999) asserts that feminist pedagogy has more to do with a perspective, rather than a methodology. By the same token, Gore (1998) claims that “in terms of what the
teacher actually does…., that is, in terms of the techniques she employs, there are unlikely to be major differences” (p. 273). She points out that specific pedagogical practices, such as using journals, working from biographies respecting students’ knowledge, and using cooperative rather than competitive assessment, do not “belong” to a single pedagogical discourse. Practices associated with radical pedagogies have always been used by progressive educators and “good teachers” might continue to be used by such teachers regardless of their political and pedagogical views (Gore, 1998, p. 273).

Although this argument sounds reasonable, it does not mean that feminist pedagogy, particularly its poststructuralist strand, has little to offer in classroom practices apart from the points discussed so far. How can a poststructural feminist perspective contribute to pedagogical practices in the classroom? The answer seems to lie in the area of curriculum and materials development, which is full of potential where we can use our creativity.

In analyzing curriculum, Tetreault (2004) developed feminist phase theory. It is a classification system of the evolution in thought about the incorporation of women’s traditions, history, and experiences into selected disciplines. The model has five phases: male-defined curriculum, contribution curriculum, bifocal curriculum, women’s curriculum, and gender-balanced curriculum. Male-defined curriculum assumes that male experience is universal and representative of humanity, and it generalizes it for all human beings.
Contribution curriculum depicts outstanding women who fit the male norm of excellence or greatness or conformed to implicit assumptions about women’s role outside the home. Bifocal curriculum thinks about women and men in dualistic and dichotomized way. Women are viewed as a group that is complementary but equal to men. Women’s curriculum looks more closely at the complexities of women’s lives and sees the need for a “pluralistic conceptualization of women” (p. 170). Also, it focuses on women’s individual experiences and perceptions of themselves. Finally, gender-balanced curriculum goes beyond seeing women in isolation and looks for the points where women’s and men’s experiences intersect. It examines the similarities and differences between women and men and also considers how gender interacts with such factors as ethnicity, race, culture, and class. Although Tetreault does not use the term poststructuralism, her take on current feminism, which she calls “pluralistic and multifocal conception of women” (p. 172), seems to represent the poststructural feminists’ perspective seen in the gender-balanced curriculum.

Implication for ES/FL pedagogy

A large part of this paper has been spent discussing feminism and feminist pedagogy in general, and has not dealt specifically with ES/FL pedagogy. However, the issues brought up by the discussion so far, I believe, have many pedagogical implications for ES/FL pedagogy. In
particular, the curriculum and materials development based on the feminist phase theory proposed by Tetreault (2004) provides a promising pedagogical tool. For example, Tetreault (2004) suggests an activity in which students grapple with texts of autobiographies in various ways so that the students are able to “engage in continuous reinterpretation of the text rather than to think they have arrived at some final mastery” (p. 179). This activity seems to be readily applicable in language teaching as well. In addition to the issues of gender, race, class, age, and sexuality with which feminist pedagogy has been grappling, ES/FL teaching supported by poststructural feminist pedagogy can incorporate such issues as language rights, language awareness, hegemony and global spread of English, language learner identities and so on. Language teaching is political. It is thus ever more crucial for language teachers to have critical awareness of the political nature of our work. Feminism, especially poststructuralist feminism, has much to offer in providing the perspective that is useful for such endeavor.

Conclusion

Feminism is a politics and a range of theories. There are three traditional strand of feminism—liberal feminism, radical feminism and Marxist/socialist feminism. Some feminists have incorporated psychoanalysis and created psychoanalytic feminism that focuses on gendered identities. Feminist pedagogy, based on such strands of feminism, emphasizes empowerment
and students’ coming to voice. This approach, which is strongly associated with critical pedagogy, is challenged by some feminists with poststructuralist approach. Poststructuralist feminists argue that identities of students as well as teachers are multiple and in process. Using Foucauldian theorizing of power, poststructural feminists maintain that teacher should exercise their power in order to help students exercise their power, instead of struggling to “share” or “give” power. Opposing the binary concept of “empower” and “oppressed,” poststructural feminists suggest that teachers should always be reflexive and humble about their teaching practices. What’s important in poststructural feminist pedagogy, then, is the concept of positionality. In incorporating poststructural feminist perspective, curriculum and materials design, based on the feminist phase theory, are the promising area that we can use our creativity. The issues concerning feminism, feminist pedagogy and poststructural feminism have many pedagogical implications for the field of ES/FL. In conclusion, poststructural feminism can provide a framework in which teachers and students create new futures. As hooks puts it, “[the] academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility” (hooks, 1994, p. 207).
References


