Gender Effects on the Perception of Direct and Indirect Speech

This study explores how gender affects university students' perceptions of indirect and direct written teacher feedback. Several studies suggest that females are more prone to produce indirect speech and males direct (Mulac, Bradac, & Gibbons, 2001; McKelvie, 2000; but see Macaulay, 2001). Surprisingly few studies, however, have examined how different genders comprehend indirect speech. Those studies that have examined the comprehension of indirect speech suggest that it is more difficult to interpret than other kinds of speech (Champagne, 2001) and that more mental processes may be needed to do so (Holtgraves, 1999). However, few of these studies have examined the effect of gender on the comprehension of indirect speech by adult native speakers.

One area where comprehension is vital is in teacher written feedback on student compositions. Males and females may interpret teacher’s comments differently (Kolb, 1975; Roberts, 1991; Cleary, 1996), and may therefore favor either direct or indirect speech more. If stereotypical speech patterns are in fact accurate, it may be that females are better able to interpret indirect written teacher feedback than are males. In addition, it may be that students perceive indirect written feedback more as being female than male.

Therefore, this study examined how gender influences the perception of indirect speech indexed here as teacher written feedback on student compositions. In particular, we examined the following questions:

1. Are indirect statements more likely to be perceived as being written by female and/or by less experienced teachers?
2. When the teacher is labeled “female,” are comments about the teacher more positive or negative?
3. Are male or female students more likely to label indirect speech as female?
4. Are male or female students more likely to respond correctly to indirect statements?

To answer these questions, data was collected from 71 university students, 27 male and 44 female. Each participant was given three essays that differed in whether the feedback was direct or indirect. Indirect feedback contained both indirect speech acts (such as “I think you might need a comma”) and indirectness (such as “Be more clear here”). The participants read the essays and critiques and then answered questions including what grade the student earned, what the strengths and weaknesses of the essay were, the gender of the teacher and their reasoning for choosing that gender and how experienced the teacher was.

Results of the study suggest all participants, regardless of gender, chose a higher grade and were better able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the paper when the feedback was direct. They were also more likely to guess that indirect teacher comments were written by a female teacher and to use negative comments for choosing the teacher’s
gender as female. Surprisingly, female students were in some instances better than male students at interpreting direct, not indirect, comments. In general, direct versus indirect speech was more of a factor in a students’ ability to understand teacher feedback than was the student’s gender. Results are discussed in terms of gender, speech act and pedagogical theories.

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**Sources**


