

# Social positioning in boys' and girls' oral presentations

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## Abstract

This study explores ninth-grade (15-year-old) students' oral presentations in language arts and art education. The main research question is: In which ways are the students' social positioning and use of verbal and non-verbal resources reflected in boys' and girls' oral presentations? In-depth analyses of video recordings of student presentations indicate some gender differences. The girls show enthusiasm and engagement and are, generally speaking, better prepared during oral presentations. The boys are more dependent on their manuscripts, and perform in a descriptive and detached manner. We argue that some of these differences can be explained by the students' attempts to maintain their social positions in class.

*Keywords:* oral skills, oral presentations, gender differences, social positions, peer groups

This article explores male and female students' oral presentations in secondary school classrooms. We argue that oral presentations include a demonstration of the students' content knowledge, communicative skills and their social positioning in class, and thus all three elements are crucial for understanding students' performance during oral presentations in schools. When students deliver oral presentations, they draw more attention to themselves than they would during regular lessons. The anticipated judgements by classmates and the way the students want to present themselves are important factors as they prepare and perform their presentations. Peers play an important role during adolescence (Martino, 1999; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Lyng, 2007; Svennevig, Tønnesson, Svenkerud, & Klette, 2012) and should be included when analysing different student positions with regard to school work.

During the last decade, Norwegian educational policies have increasingly focused on oral skills. In the new national curriculum (LKO6, 2006), oral skills, writing, ICT, reading and numeracy have been defined as the five basic skills that students are required to master. This focus on oral skills has led to the introduction of oral presentations as a frequent activity in Norwegian secondary classrooms

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(Hertzberg, 2003; Klette et al., 2008). Indeed, the recently conducted PISA+ Video Study (Klette et al., 2008) indicates that 8 percent of the lessons devoted to language arts education (i.e., Norwegian) are spent on students' oral presentations. In-depth analyses of oral presentations (Rygg, 2010; Svenkerud, Hertzberg, & Klette, 2012) suggest that these presentations follow a fixed structure. For the most part, the students work in groups to plan the presentations and delegate the various parts among themselves. During the presentation, the students stand together in front of the class and present their parts individually. Some students use visual aids; however, there is little use of improvisation, and questions or comments from the audience are rare (Svennevig et al., 2012). A Norwegian study conducted in 2010 (Dæhlen, Smette, & Strandlie, 2011) claims that many students worry about oral presentations; the students report that exposing themselves to teachers and classmates is disturbing for them, and forces them to be well prepared.

The question addressed in this article is: In which ways are students' social positioning and use of verbal and non-verbal resources reflected in boys' and girls' oral presentations? In answering this question, we draw on in-depth analyses of how ninth-grade (15-year-old) students from one Norwegian classroom act and interact during oral presentations. We analysed the students' use of verbal and non-verbal resources and how they communicate with their audience and each other during oral presentations, including gender-specific communication patterns. We further analysed their oral presentations with regard to social positioning and peer-group affiliation. In doing so, we combined two separate, and quite distinct, areas of research: communication theories relevant to analysing oral presentations, including classroom studies of oral presentations; and theories on social positioning and peer-group affiliation regarding schoolwork during this specific phase of schooling (secondary school). In the following section, we summarise existing, relevant research in these two areas. Based on this review, we develop an analytical framework aimed at analysing how social positioning and communication skills (e.g. the use of verbal and non-verbal resources) are reflected in boys' and girls' oral presentations.

### **Theoretical perspectives: Research on social positioning and communication skills**

This section reviews the field of social positioning in the classroom and theories of communication relevant to analysis of student presentations. We start out with theories of social positioning.

#### ***Positioning theories and gender***

Social positioning theories attempt to articulate an alternate way of reading and understanding the dynamics of human relationships. Hollway (1984) introduced the concepts of "position" and "positioning" in the social sciences. She discussed

women's and men's subject positions as "... the product of their history of positioning in discourses" (p. 228) and demonstrated how men and women negotiate their gender-related positions in conversations with others. Inspired by Hollway, we chose to use the concept of positioning rather than the more static concept of "role" because, as pointed out by Harré and van Langenhove (1991), "positioning" draws attention to the dynamic aspects of discourse. According to Harré and van Langenhove (1999), positioning theory assumes that human behaviour is constrained by group norms and that human subjectivity is a product of the history of each individual's interactions with other people. Davies and Harré (1991) argue that the concept of positioning can be used to facilitate thinking about linguistically oriented social analyses in more powerful ways than the concept of "role" can. For the purposes of this analysis, social positioning serves as an analytical background to interpret observed behaviour that is typical of boys and girls in the classroom and to link their use of communicative sources and interaction skills to their different positions in class.

As indicated, peer groups play an important role during adolescence. A recent review of adolescent peer groups divides the students into five main groups: (1) elite and popular; (2) athletes; (3) deviants; (4) academics; and (5) others (Sussman, Pokhrel, Ashmore, & Brown, 2007). This classification resonates with two recent Norwegian studies (Løvland, 2006; Lyng, 2007) that classify students into different positions and roles. Relying on analyses of oral classroom presentations, Løvland (2006) distinguishes five student positions: "expert", "dutiful", "entertaining", "saboteur" and "aesthetic". Her study shows that while some students adopt an expert position while presenting, showing authority and professional confidence and often include their own experiences and stances, other students take a dutiful position by trying to fulfil expected student roles. In contrast to expert students, dutiful students rely primarily on the school curriculum. Students adopting the entertainer position use humour and irony. Saboteurs are reluctant or indifferent toward the presentation, while the aesthetic students use pictures, music and drama while presenting (Løvland, 2006, p. 196).

Lyng (2007) describes the relationship between gender and school orientation by identifying seven typical student styles or role patterns: "the golden boy", "the geek", "the macho boy", "the nerd", "the golden girl", "the mouse", "the babe" and "the wildcat" (2007, pp. 468–474). The golden boys and golden girls are both popular and polite, take school seriously and do well academically. Nerds, either girls or boys, also take their schoolwork seriously, but are not as popular as the golden students. While the geeks (boys) and the mice (girls) are often passive or indifferent toward school, the macho boy has disturbing and noisy behaviour. The babe, who cares more for boys and makeup than her own learning, and the wildcat, who is in opposition to both students and teachers, often reject school altogether (Lyng, 2007). Even if these categories do not adequately reflect the complexity and diversity

of student relationships, and of course they vary among classrooms, the classification is still useful for analytical purposes. Further, these categories are not necessarily static; the students may change and combine them depending on the situation and peer group.

In terms of peer-group identification, some interesting gendered patterns are observed during adolescence. Peer acceptance seems to have a negative impact on how some males relate to learning and schooling. Based on their acceptance or rejection of group norms, boys tend to either include or exclude one another (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). In some peer groups, boys who do well academically are considered weak and feminine. Out of a fear of "... not being masculine enough" (Phoenix, 2003, p. 243), scholars claim that some boys, often high-ability students, deliberately put less effort into their work, and present themselves as students who do not take school seriously (Epstein, 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Warrington, Younger, & Williams, 2000, p. 396; Tinklin, Croxford, Ducklin, & Frame, 2001, p. 102; Phoenix, 2003, p. 243; Tinklin, 2003, pp. 321–322). While an anti-schooling culture can be strong among boys (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998), it seems to be more acceptable for girls to work hard academically (Epstein, 1998; Myhill, 2002). Girls are often described as better able to adapt to the demands of the classroom. They work more consistently and show more determination and effort (Sukhnandant, Lee, & Kelleher, 2000). They also produce neater and more detailed work, place a higher value on presentations and spend more time trying to improve their products (Warrington & Younger, 1996; MacDonald, Saunders, & Benfield, 1999; Sukhnandant et al., 2000).

Based on extensive ethnographic observations and interviews with students in grade 8, Francis, Skelton and Read (2009, p. 5) distinguish between students who are high achievers (HA) and students who are both HA and popular (HAP). The students labelled as HAP are regarded as physically attractive with trendy clothes, and are popular regardless of social class or ethnicity. Male HAP students are frequently skilled in sports, something that might compensate for their academic achievement, which is often regarded as a feminine trait (Francis et al., 2009). Even though HAP students manage to combine academic achievement with being popular, some boys still express a fear of being identified as "gay" (2009, p. 15). According to Harris, Nixon and Rudduck (1993) who interviewed 57 students in grade 11 (aged 16 years), boys are more willing to put effort into their academic work as long as their masculinity is not threatened.

Willis' (1977) concept of "laddish" is often used to describe repellent male behaviour. The explanation of some boys' laddish behaviour (Willis, 1977; Jackson, 2006) toward school is based on evidence suggesting that boys are afraid of social failure. Laddish behaviour is often connected to foolish, silly or ridiculous behaviour among boys (Francis, 2000, p. 94), but the term also refers to anti-school behaviour among students of both genders (Jackson, 2006). Lyng's study shows that even

though babes and wildcats reject school in different ways, girls from both groups can be labelled “ladettes”. Moreover, Jackson (2006) points out that the fears of social and academic failure are conjointly important. Therefore, students who focus more on defending their own self-esteem than academic achievement often use laddish behaviour as a self-protecting strategy (Jackson, 2003, 2006).

Thus far, we have presented research on social positioning used to analyse students’ oral presentations. We now turn to communication theory as a second approach to analysing oral presentations.

### ***Gender and communication skills***

This section provides a short overview of two analytical perspectives from communication theory that are relevant to our analysis: Norris’ (2004) analytical communication model, emphasising bodily and non-verbal communication, and Svennevig’s (2009) analytical categories of language style. The use of non-verbal communication refers to how students use their voice, facial expressions, eye contact and gestures to indicate their emotional state and personal engagement and also how they want to present themselves to their classmates. A vivid non-verbal repertoire may indicate that the student is personally engaged during the presentation, while the absence of gestures and eye contact can signal the opposite – they feel disengaged from the content or situation. Shyness in relation to public exposition can also influence these situations; Dæhlen et al. (2011) state that several students expressed worry and discomfort when they were standing in front of their classmates and teachers during their presentations.

Norris (2004) works from a multimodal communication perspective. People seldom interact through language alone; other factors bring meaning to communication as well. Instead of referring to verbal and non-verbal modes of communication, which implies that language is the paramount mode of communication, Norris divides communicative modes into embodied and disembodied modes. Embodied modes include proxemics (the distance between the transmitter and the receiver), posture, head movement, gesture, gaze and spoken language. Disembodied modes include layout, print and music (Norris, 2004, p. 2). It is not possible to discern all of the communicative modes that occur during an interaction process within the frame of this analysis. Therefore, this analysis concentrates on embodied modes and pays limited attention to the disembodied modes such as pictures and music. This analysis considers features such as hand movements, eye contact and how the students place themselves in the room. These analytical categories resonate with our intention to study the students’ positioning during the enactment of oral presentations.

Language use is important for analysing oral presentations. The aim of identifying and interpreting differences in linguistic styles between males and females has interested linguistic researchers for decades (Lakoff, 1975; Labov, 1990; Trudgill,

2000; Coates & Pichler, 2011). Argamon, Koppel, Fine and Shimoni (2003) argue that differences between female and male language are based on interaction between the speaker or writer and his or her linguistic context. They find evidence for a gender-based variation along Biber, Conrad and Reppen's (1998) "involvedness-informational" dimension. An involved language style contains features that typically show interaction between the speaker/writer and the listener/reader, such as first and second person pronouns; Argamon argues that women tend to have a more involved style than men (Argamon et al., 2003). In the analyses that follow, we will use personal involvement as a dimension by analysing differences between a descriptive (uninvolved) or interpretative (involved) style in the students' oral presentations.

For males, conversation is a way of negotiating status in a group. Females, on the other hand, use conversation to negotiate closeness (Tannen, 1991). Confirming statements and building on each other's initiatives are parts of a female, consensus-building, communication style (Hoel, 1999). Classroom studies show that boys tend to dominate classroom discussions by arguing more openly and interrupting others, while girls use a less argumentative style (Holmes, 1994; Hoel, 1996; Tannen, 1996; Aukrust, 2003).

To analyse language use during oral presentations, this study draws on the concept of "language style", as described by Svennevig (2009). Svennevig builds on linguistic work by Biber (1998) and Chafe (1982) and divides variations in language style into different concept pairs such as: (1) formal/informal, and (2) synthetic/analytic. Formal and informal styles are related to the physical environment, that is to say, whether the communication is public or private. Formal style is normally associated with the use of standard language, while affective and slang words are typical of informal style. Synthetic and analytic styles describe whether the communication is planned or spontaneous. When you have time to plan what to say, you can integrate more information; therefore, planned communication (synthetic) usually contains more details than spontaneous (analytic) conversation. Spontaneous speech is characterised by short sentences with a limited amount of information (Svennevig, 2009, pp. 258–271).

By combining social positioning theory with the analytical categories developed by Norris (2004) and Svennevig (2009), a range of features can be developed, targeted toward identifying patterns related to students' oral presentations. Table 1 summarises these features in four dimensions that will be used to analyse the students' oral presentations: (1) language style; (2) verbal and non-verbal communication; (3) interaction; and (4) preparation and planning.

## **Materials, methods and analytic approaches**

This analysis draws on data from the Norwegian video study PISA+ (Klette et al., 2008; Klette, 2009) which covered video recordings from mathematics, science and

Table 1. An overview of analytical dimensions

Dimensions	Analytical concepts	Description
Language style	Formal or informal Synthetic or analytic Personal involvement	Everyday language or academic language Planned or spontaneous Intensity and emotion or personal evaluation Interpretive form or descriptive form
Non-verbal communication	Gesture Posture Gaze	Type of gesture Movement in the room Eye contact
Interaction	Interaction with the audience Interaction within the group Turn-taking	Repetitions and explanations Use of pronouns References to each other or mutual support, trust, solidarity, cooperation or competition Presenting parts individually or taking turns
Preparation and planning	Visual aids	Use of manuscripts/learned by heart PowerPoint/whiteboard/notes/textbooks

language arts secondary classrooms (grade 9). Out of 150 total recorded lessons (covering all three subject areas), 15 were devoted to oral presentations. Most of those were organised as cross-curricular projects during which students worked in pairs or groups on a specific theme or topic area (e.g. World War II; National Romantic Era; drug abuse; genetic manipulation etc.). Our analysis builds on video observations of two lessons during which the students present topics from the National Romantic Era (1840–1855) to learn about art and literature during this specific period of history. The fact that all students presented themes related to the Romantic Era during these lessons, that the Romantic Era is a central theme in the national curriculum and that all students are supposed to learn about literature, language, music and art from this period according to the national curriculum (L97, 1997; LK06, 2006) made these lessons interesting for further analysis. Also, the facts that the groups were similar in size and that all group members had to contribute during the presentation were important factors for selecting these lessons. In these lessons, the students, except for one group, were divided into same-sex groups. Both lessons analysed lasted 45 minutes.

The school is in an urban, upper-middle-class area. All students were ethnic Norwegians, and the teacher was female in her early thirties. There were 23 students in the class. While 17 of the students had oral presentations during the first lesson, the other 6 students gave their presentations the next day. Students were divided into 11 groups. Each group was supposed to select a poet or poem, a painter or painting, or novelist or composer (music) as the topic of their presentation. Each presentation lasted approximately 3 to 6 minutes and could include visual resources like PowerPoint, overhead projections and the like. Table 2

Table 2. An overview of the presentations

Presentations	Number of students	Topic/theme	Equipment	Time spent
1	2 girls	Music: <i>Morning Mood</i> by Edward Grieg	Overhead/CD player	5.05 min.
2	2 girls	Music: Ole Bull and his music	Projector/ PowerPoint	4.07 min.
3	2 boys	Poem: <i>The Devil's Thrill</i> by Jørgen Moe	Textbook	2.57 min.
4	2 girls	Painting: <i>Birch in Storm</i> by Johan Christian Dahl	Projector/ PowerPoint	5.32 min.
5	2 boys	Painting: <i>The Wedding Journey in Hardanger</i> by Adolph Tidemand and Hans Guide	Projector/ PowerPoint	3.40 min.
6	3 girls	Poem: <i>The Day Will Never Come</i> by Aasmund Olavsson Vinje	Overhead/text of the poem	6.34 min.
7	2 boys	Poem: <i>I Can See Again Such Hills and Valleys</i> by Aasmund Olavsson Vinje	Textbook	4.09 min.
8	2 girls	Fairy Tales: Grimm's Fairy Tales by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm	Textbook	4.48 min.
9	1 boy 1 girl	Poem: <i>The Old Mountains</i> by Ivar Aasen	Textbook	2.12 min.
10	2 boys	Fairy tale collectors: Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe	Notes	3.22 min.
11	2 girls	Linguist: Knud Knudsen	Whiteboard, notes	3.21 min.

summarise the themes, equipment, number of students and durations of the 11 oral presentations.

### **Analyses**

To gain an overview of the material, we began by looking carefully and repeatedly at all 11 presentations. Then, they were transcribed verbatim, in Norwegian. The presentations were then systematically analysed with regard to the students' language style, use of gestures, posture and gaze, interaction patterns and use of visual aids. Analyses of these lessons are thus based on careful observation of the video recordings and transcriptions of the same video recordings. When writing this article, quotes used to illustrate typical features of the students' presentations were translated into English.

### **Results**

All eight presentations were organised in similar ways: The group members stood together in front of the class to present their information with the help of a manuscript, and there was little use of improvisation in the presentations. After each presentation, the audience applauded politely. There were few, if any, questions



from the teacher or students and the teacher's feedback normally consisted of short utterances such as "This was a good presentation, Nina" and "Thank you, Peter".

The duration of the presentations varied between three and six minutes, and the female groups' presentations were slightly longer than the males' (see Table 2). Students were focused during their own group's presentation, and most of the students knew what to present, when to present it and in which order to present the parts. If someone forgot what to say, they received help from other group members. There were no signs of students sabotaging their own or their classmates' presentations. Indeed, the "saboteur position" (Løvland, 2006) is difficult to apply to the material of our study. Little time was spent on off-task activities, although the teacher had to silence some students in the audience a couple of times. Except for these episodes and some fumbling with the technical aids, the presentations were carried out smoothly and without interruption.

### **Language style**

Most of the students used a synthetic style; the presentations were carefully planned, with few signs of spontaneity. Moreover, the students integrated a great deal of information into each sentence. The following is an example from a presentation by two boys on a poem by Vinje: "Aasmund Olavsson Vinje went on a voyage in 1860 from Christiania to Trondheim to see Carl the fifteenth, or the coronation of Carl the fifteenth". The boys incorporated Vinje's full name, and the place, time and purpose of his trip into one sentence. One exception to the synthetic language style was found in Presentation 3 on the poem *The Devil's Thrill*. This presentation was characterised by a lack of elaboration and details, illustrated by the following quote: "... and then that man who pours the beer, he sees that guy who plays the violin". General and inaccurate descriptions such as "that man" and "that guy" are characteristic of the analytic language style which is more frequently used in unplanned, face-to-face communication.

Most of the students switched between formal and informal language styles during their presentations. Only two of the eight presentations were characterised by significantly more formal language (one male group and one female group). These two groups made frequent use of academic terms, which led to a relatively formal presentation. The first example is from Presentation 7 (poem: Vinje), by two boys: "On his travels to Trondheim he (Vinje) gives vivid descriptions of villagers, attire and the magnificent nature". The second example is from Presentation 2, by two girls: "Already as a ten-year-old, Ole Bull was an excellent violinist. When he was in his twenties he was recognised as one of Europe's greatest violin players".

Terms such as "magnificent nature", "excellent" and "recognised" create a formal and public language style. The use of formal and informal language is evenly distributed between the boys and girls, and in our material, there are examples of both male and female students who presented in informal ways using common

words that are often associated with personal communication. For instance, this example from Presentation 3 by two boys: “The poem is about – ah – such a – it’s like a wedding – and then it’s a man who goes down to the basement and he pours – the beer ...”, or this example from Presentation 1, by two girls: “He thought Edvard was so good and such things”. These two girls, presenting on Edvard Grieg, expressed themselves in an informal style, using the composer’s first name. The expression “so good and such things” is typically used in oral, non-formal communication. However, there was no significant difference between the male and female groups in terms of a distinction between formal and informal language.

Some interesting gendered differences were identified in terms of the distinction between personal and impersonal language. For instance, most of the girls used a personal approach, while the boys were more depersonalised. This was particularly apparent in the two presentations of Norwegian painters and their paintings (see Presentations 4 and 5 in Table 2). The two girls presenting *Birch in Storm* (Presentation 4) and the two boys presenting *The Wedding Journey in Hardanger* (Presentation 5) displayed the paintings using PowerPoint. Even though both groups described the paintings, the boys’ presentation was more distant and without any personal evaluation of the painting. The two girls linked their analysis to their personal points of view, stating, for example:

We like this picture best of all the pictures Dahl has painted. Eh, it’s because of the nice – the colours he used. All the small details, and we especially like the shifts in the weather. All happening at the same time.

There were several examples of personal engagement in the female groups. One girl (Presentation 8) described her experience with the fairy tale *The Frog King*: “I grew up with *The Frog King*, which is a really nice story”. The three girls (Presentation 6) presenting *The Day Will Never Come* revealed their favourite stanzas and explained why they liked specific verses in the poem:

Eh my favourite stanza is: You will always follow me on my journey as the shadow follows its sun. Eh, I liked this verse best – because he (Vinje) feels that she (his deceased wife) is with him all the time, no matter where he goes. This is a beautiful way to say it. He can hear her and he sees her everywhere he goes.

Two girls whose presentation was on the violinist, Ole Bull, also showed personal engagement during their presentation. When explaining that several of Bull’s compositions were lost, one of the girls disappointedly expressed: “And the thing is – what a pity that he didn’t write down his compositions”.

When it comes to the interpretative form versus the descriptive form, there is clear evidence in our data to suggest that girls use the interpretative form more often than boys, who have a tendency to use the descriptive form. These quotations from

Presentation 4 (girls) and Presentation 5 (boys) are typical illustrations of this finding: (1) “This painting [the painting is of a birch tree in a storm] is, in retrospect, seen as a symbol to describe the small nation’s struggle against the changing winds of history” (Presentation 4, two girls). (2) [This is a painting of a wedding procession in a boat on the Hardangerfjord], “Gude has painted the landscape here – and you can see – here you see the sun – or the light reflecting in the water” (Presentation 5, two boys).

Both presentations were about famous paintings, and both the male and female groups displayed the picture on a whiteboard. However, the girls interpreted the meaning behind the painting, while the boys were more concrete and told the audience what they could see.

### ***Communicative skills: verbal and non-verbal communication***

Some of the students, both girls and boys, showed visible signs of discomfort or nervousness. For example, one of the girls presenting the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales kept tugging her sleeves down to cover her hands, and one of the boys presenting *The Wedding Journey in Hardanger* was constantly pulling on his collar.

Figures 1 and 2 are distinctive examples of how girls and boys delivered oral presentations in this class. These figures illustrate some important gender differences when it comes to delivering oral presentations. The girls stand on both sides of the whiteboard, use visual aids such as PowerPoint and occasionally point at



Figure 1. Two girls presenting Grimm’s Fairy Tales



Figure 2. Two boys presenting “The Devil's Thrill”

the pictures and illustrations shown on the whiteboard. They know their presentations almost by heart, and make little use of their manuscripts or notes. Further, they make eye contact with both their audience and each other. The two boys, on the other hand, stand in front of the whiteboard and rely heavily on the textbook as a manuscript and support. They read aloud from the book and make little eye contact with their audience or each other.

The use of intentional gestures to communicate something, such as pointing or making hand gestures, implies that students know their presentation materials well. The boys who simply recited their poem without knowing their text seemed to be so dependent on the manuscript that it prevented them from making gestures or looking at their audience. Since the girls had memorised most of their presentation, they were free to have more vivid body language. When they wanted to make a claim or emphasise something, they used hand and arm gestures to point at features on the board, to underline something, or to demonstrate the rhythm of a line. The girls also frequently made eye contact with each other and with the audience.

### ***Interaction***

While presenting, all the students had some form of interaction with their fellow group members. This interaction served two functions: either to help the other student(s) with the presentation, or to receive support from other group members. The two girls whose presentation was on Grieg (Presentation 1), and the two girls

whose presentation was on Dahl (Presentation 4) demonstrated intimate interaction with each other and often referred to one another or repeated each other's statements when presenting. For example, Helene: "He was very small". Emilie: "Yes, he was only 161 centimetres". In addition, they used phrases like "... as Helene said", or "... like Emilie said before", which are examples of what Tannen (1996) and Hoel (1996) describe as the consensus-building communication style. These girls used the pronoun "we" 10 times throughout their presentations and used "I" only two times. The interaction between the boys who presented *The Wedding Journey in Hardanger* (Presentation 5) was also characterised by confirmations, smiles, supportive feedback and use of the pronoun "we", although not as frequently as in the female group. All presentations were characterised by confidence and solidarity among group members, although in different ways and manners. Students helped each other if they forgot what to say and often smiled or nodded at their fellow presenters to signal that they had finished speaking. They also helped each other to start and stop the CD player or to change PowerPoint slides. The exception was the two girls who presented on Bull (Presentation 2). These two girls seemed very well prepared and knew most of their presentation by heart. However, they rarely repeated or confirmed each other's statements. The limited interaction between them served to make their presentation quite formal.

The students established contact with their audience in different ways. They addressed their classmates directly, with personal pronouns such as "we" and "you". Even though most students used phrases such as "you know", and "we all know that", some students used these terms more often than others. For instance, the girls presenting *Birch in Storm* (Presentation 4), the girls presenting *Vinje* (Presentation 6) and the boys presenting *The Wedding Journey in Hardanger* (Presentation 5) all referred to familiar experiences in order to obtain the attention of the audience, using terms such as "cabin-to-cabin hikes", "autumn feeling" and "heartbreak".

### ***Preparations and planning***

All of the students were prepared (albeit some more than others), they presented their topics and theme (the Romantic Era) in front of the class and they took turns when speaking to the audience. However, it seems that the boys, especially those presenting *The Devil's Thrill* (Presentation 3) and *I Can See Again Such Hills and Valleys* (Presentation 7), used less time to rehearse and prepare for the oral presentation. They read the poems relatively monotonously and only used about 30 seconds to explain the content and meaning of the poems to their audience.

### **Discussion**

The most apparent difference between the genders is the girls' use of more personal ways of presenting, with the boys' presentation style being more distant and

impersonal. Further, the girls seemed better prepared for their presentations; most of them knew their presentations by heart and used their manuscripts only as mnemonic cues. The girls' presentations were systematically longer than the boys', and they made wider use of available non-verbal resources like pictures and music. Being well-prepared also provided the girls with better opportunities to use non-verbal communication strategies like eye contact and gestures. It should, however, be mentioned that both girls and boys in this class had relatively modest use of non-verbal communication. There were no differences in terms of discomfort or nervousness, either linked to gender, or to specific groups, except for the two (one boy and one girl) already mentioned. We continue this section by discussing more in-depth the use of language style and social positioning, interaction and the use of visual resources across the analysed presentations.

### ***Language style and social positioning***

The distinction between formal and informal language styles indicates whether the communication is public or private. Oral presentations are, by definition, public. All the students combined formal and informal styles. They typically started their presentations using formal and academic language and then proceeded with a more informal, everyday style. This might indicate that the students began their presentations by reciting from a manuscript, which was then 'translated' into their own everyday language. The mixing of formal and informal language, which we saw in both girls' and boys' presentations, is likely due to their desire to prove that they are knowledgeable to their teacher and classmates while still maintaining their 'status' within their peer groups.

Personal engagement was also observed in these oral presentations. The girls' personal engagement reflected interest, involvement and enthusiasm. Some of these girls assumed what Løvland describes as the "expert position" (2006) and resembled Lyng's description of "golden girls" (2007).

Some girls, particularly the girls presenting *Birch in Storm* (Presentation 4) and *The Day Will Never Come* (Presentation 6), displayed deep knowledge of their topics. Using personal examples, these students further displayed an emotional understanding and empathy with the painter's and poet's feelings. This personal involvement, in combination with knowledge of the content, placed them in the expert position as described by Løvland (2006). Thus the "expert position" (Løvland, 2006) and the "golden girls" (Lyng, 2007) were both evident in our material. Presentation 5, on *The Wedding Journey in Hardanger*, by two boys, can also be characterised as painstaking, meaning the two boys resemble "golden boys" (Lyng, 2007) or HAP students (Francis et al., 2009). While professional commitment is appreciated by the teacher and golden boys and girls (Lyng, 2007), it may be discredited by other classmates, who perceive it as negative to be engaged in school activities (Francis et al., 2009). It is possible that it is more acceptable for girls

to work hard academically (Epstein, 1998; Warrington et al., 2000, pp. 393, 402; Myhill, 2002) and, therefore, take fewer risks when it comes to norm-breaking behaviour while presenting their knowledge (Harris et al., 1993, p. 7).

### ***Interaction and social positioning***

Even if monological performances such as oral presentations make it difficult for students to interact with their audiences, they managed to address their classmates and teachers through different strategies. During all the presentations, there was interaction between both group members and entire groups and their audience. However, there was no evidence of students adopting the typical “entertainer” position (Løvland, 2006).

There were also no signs of typical laddish behaviour in our data (Jackson, 2003, 2006). The students appeared to be engaged, efficient, focused and quiet. One exception was the male group presenting *The Devil's Thrill* (Presentation 3) who read the poem, seemingly without having practiced beforehand. The boys may have been trying to demonstrate their dissociation from the poem and activity, without openly showing rejection. This resembles Jackson's (2003) finding that some boys maintain masculine positions within their peer groups by trying to be regarded as taking little interest in schoolwork.

### ***Preparation and visual aids***

Appropriate use of non-verbal communication methods such as gestures and eye contact was often related to how prepared the students were for their presentations. In addition to being better prepared and knowing their presentations by heart, the girls made use of more external resources than the boys. The use of PowerPoint, pictures and CD players while presenting helped them relax and implied that they were not dependent only upon their own voices or body language.

The theme of the Romantic Era played an important role in the students' level of interest and commitment to the assignment. Romanticism and emotions are at the core of the Romantic Era and, therefore, can be perceived as feminine and in opposition to the accepted norms for schoolboys' masculinity. Talking about love, nature and beauty might be more difficult for boys than girls, especially since the presentations were made in front of male friends. We also know that gender differences in performance vary across themes and topics (Murphy & Elwood, 1998). Some specific themes, such as Romanticism, might increase differences in achievement between boys and girls because of elements that can be seen as threatening to the “macho position” (Lyng, 2007). Therefore, one explanation is that gendered differences in these oral presentations reflect the boys' struggles to reconcile schoolwork with their masculine positions.

## Conclusion

Although our sample was too small to allow for clear generalisations, our findings show gendered differences between the students' oral presentations in this specific class. The girls seemed better prepared, and their presentations were facilitated by self-made manuscripts that were learned by heart. Their presentations exhibited more personal features, and they more frequently assumed the expert position described by Løvland (2006) by showing enthusiasm and engagement.

Several studies show that male students tend to dominate oral discussions, while female students tend to do better in writing assignments. Oral presentations often demand some form of written materials, such as a manuscript or PowerPoint slides, and the girls seemed to have mastered these tools.

Depictions of boys as 'losers' and girls as 'winners' in the school context are exaggerated. Analyses of Norwegian national tests in reading show, for example, that gender differences vary depending on the content of the subject (Hvistendahl & Roe, 2009). Girls perform consistently better when the class material requires reflection and interpretation (i.e. the active use of language skills in oral presentations), while gender differences are less apparent when it comes to fact-based knowledge (Bakken, Borg, Hegna, & Backe-Hansen, 2008). While some themes might diminish the differences between girls and boys, others might increase gender-specific patterns and lead to an unintended gendered imbalance in outcomes. The Romantic Era, in which emotions and affections are principal themes, might present difficulties for boys presenting orally in class. The boys' use of depersonalised forms of presenting may have been due to their desire to avoid seeming feminine. This article argues that some of the differences observed in the data are due to boys' desires to protect their social positions by finding strategies to preserve their masculinity. Hence, gender differences may be a relevant factor in students' attempts to reconcile learning content with maintaining social position.

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