

The Effect of Gender on Foreign Language Learning

Mojtaba Maghsudi¹, Elham Sharifi^{2,3*}, Sharareh Abedi³

-
1. Assistant Professor, Farhangian University, Arak, Iran.
 2. English Teacher of Shazand, Arak, Iran.
 3. Department of English Language, Arak Branch, Islamic Azad University, Arak, Iran.
- * Corresponding Author's Email: elham.sharifi59@gmail.com
-

Abstract

Learners are affected by many factors in the foreign language learning process. The level of cognitive development, socio economic and cultural background, the ability to acquire a language, types of memory system, age and motivation can be expressed as the factors affecting foreign language learning. One particularly interesting factor is gender that runs in parallel with other factors. This factor can affect language use and learning as a result of biological differences between the two sexes. Having gone over a good number of works studied the impact of gender on foreign language learning, the present researchers found out that there were no clear distinction between male and female in learning a foreign language but the way of using a language and strategies used by learners in learning process were applied by them differently. These differences help them become successful in different areas of learning, whether in math, language arts, sciences or others.

Keywords: gender, second language learning, learning strategies, sex exclusive, sex preferential

INTRODUCTION

Language learning has always become an important work-field both in schools and other private sectors dealing with language teaching and learning process. Recently the topic of the role of gender in second language learning has been researched greatly by ESL and language specialists. When examining the role of gender on the learning of language one must consider that there are numerous ways in which it can affect language use and development. Susan Hugar in her article by the title of "The effect of gender on first and second language use and acquisition" stated that gender is a variable that can affect language use and learning as a result of biological differences between the two sexes, psychological effects, or socio-cultural influences. There is no doubt that learning a foreign language is so complicated that a wide range of different factors should be considered in the process of learning it (Gorjian, Pazhakh and Parang, 2012). Gender is a concept that contributes different linguistic strategies to both

genders based on context. It means that the concept of gender presents the social and contextual expectations each society put on the part of each gender culturally as well as socially.

SEX EXCLUSIVE

In a sex exclusive language, men and women often have separate distinct vocabularies and even grammar. Many words and forms are restricted to a certain gender (Finch, 2003). Holmes (2013) states: “women and men do not speak in exactly the same way as each other in any community (p.160)”. He notes that the responsibilities of them are not same in such communities, and everyone is familiar with it, and knows what they are.

SEX PREFERENTIAL

Sometimes women and men use language in a same way. Holmes (2013) states: “In western urban communities where women’s and men’s social roles overlap, the speech form they use also overlap. In other words they do not use completely different forms .They use different quantities or frequencies of the same forms (p.163)”.

Amanda (2010) concluded that there is a close relationship between writing and gender. In fact, it is assumed that female students often perform better than their counterparts in subjects as English language and literature whereas, some studies showed that superiority of males (Swann, 1992). Richard and Lesley (2007) on their research on writing proficiency divided the student in two groups of male and female and asked them to write one descriptive and opinion paragraph about the given topic in order to determine their level of writing proficiency at the pretest stage .After ten session of treatment, the participants were given four topic for writing, two topics on descriptive and two on opinion topics in other to check their progress. The result of the study showed the superiority of learning writing skill of male on opinion one paragraph essay and superiority of females on descriptive one. And also there have been numerous studies done in the field of computer and instructional technologies, social network, primary school, science and mathematics education and the use of language. (Cavas, 2010; Demir, 2008; Chamot, 1987).

Other studies regarded greater verbal abilities to females (Halpen, 1986). In fact female students tend to be more capable readers and writers in comparison to male students. Susan Hugar on her mentioned article reported a research that was done by Ali Shenadeh. Shenadeh (1999) investigated the role of gender on the acquisition of a second language. He found that many of the effects that gender has on the use of a first language are similar to the many of the effects that gender has on learning a second language. In his study he wanted to test the 1986 findings of Gass and Varonis. He describes their findings to be that, “Men took greater advantage of the opportunities to use conversation in a way that allowed them to produce greater amount of comprehensible output whereas women use the conversation to obtain a greater amount of comprehensible input (p.258)”. The men participated more in the conversation and had more control over where the conversation was going. In order to test these findings, he concluded a study to compare the interaction between ESL students in same gender and mixed gender groups. Twenty seven adult ESL subjects from a different countries

were asked to work in pairs or groups to perform a variety of communication tasks. His findings support the findings of Gass and Varonis (1986). Men dominate the conversation and often have more control than the female involved in ESL classrooms. This gives male students the advantage over female in mixed-gender tasks.

Shenadeh (ibid.) concluded that these gender differences in second language acquisition may be the result of socio-cultural influences. He relates this to the fact that “it is more acceptable in some cultures and subcultures than in other for men and women to communicate freely and casually with each other at work and in social situation (p.259)”. Because of these variations men and women play very different roles in conversation. Males take more of an opportunity to talk therefore produce more comprehensible output. On the other hand, females use the conversation to develop their skills and knowledge by obtaining comprehensible input. This is important because conversation is very important in the acquisition and development of a second language.

The role of culture in pushing individuals into their appropriate gender roles is very important. Under this conception, gender is not a fixed category and it may vary depending on the speech situation and the type of interaction that takes place, as Ehrlich (1997) puts it, gender is “a construct shaped by historical, cultural, social, and interactional factors (p. 424)”. In second language learning the concept of gender is variously interpreted. To Ellis (1994), there was nothing conclusive in studies of gender differences in SLA in achievement, attitudes and strategy use at that time. However, in a study reported by Aslan (2009) it was reported gender influences strategy choice. Learners from different cultures use strategies in different ways. Along the same vein, females and males are observed to employ various strategies in language acquisition. It has been proven that men and women speak very differently from each other. Susan Hugar suggest two main categories, sex exclusive and sex preferential politeness strategies that can be used to categories the way in which men and women differ linguistically. In sex exclusive, the differences between the linguistic features are “usually small differences in pronunciation or word shape “(Holmes, 2013: p. 160). This occurs mostly in traditional conservative cultures where there is little opportunity for changes or cross overs between male and female roles. Sex preferential implies an unequal distribution of social power between men and women. This is most likely the result of the long history of patriarchy and male dominance in many western societies (Finch, 2003).

Holmes (2001) suggest that women’s speech is characterized by lexical hedges or fillers, tag questions, rising intonation on declaratives ,empty adjectives, precise color term, intensifiers such as just and so hyper correct grammar ,super polite forms, avoidance of strong swear words and emphatic stress. While these characteristics are most likely not caused by any biological differences in females, they are most likely the result of psychological and socio-cultural influences. These influences would be appear in women in any language environment. Whether it is a women’s first or second language. This is why it is important for linguists and as well as second language learner specialist to analyze the role that gender plays in language use and development.

Another interesting difference between men and women in the process of second language learning is the choice of use and preference for different learning strategies. Since the

early 1970s there has been considerable research interest in the strategies that foreign or second language learners use in learning and using a target language. Numerous empirical researchers (Oxford, 1989; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989) have shown that gender has an important effect on extent of strategy use and women use of learning strategies more often than men. Results of the research has been done by Oxford and Nyikos (1989) show that gender has an important effect on the frequency of strategy use. The research findings indicate that women use memory, cognitive and social strategies more than men. Oxford and Nyikos (1989) on their research show that women tend to use all types of strategies more frequently. Oxford (1990) defines that learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, more enjoyable and more transferable to new situation of language learning and use. She also believes that using of appropriate strategies ensure a greater success in learning and more confidence.

CONCLUSION

However just because men and women use different learning strategies does not mean that one gender is better at learning a second language than the other. Variation in gender and variation by proficiency seem to be working in very different ways. Furthermore, both males and females are equipped with some predetermined tendencies that would be helpful for them to learn some aspects of language must faster and easier. Strategy instruction should help learners explore ways that they can learn the target language more effectively as well as encourage them to self-evaluate and self-direct their learning.

Men and women are socially different in that society lays down different social roles for them and expects different behavior patterns from them; nevertheless, it is clear that in many circumstances, women and men tend to use language differently. A number of stylistic differences between female and male speech have been observed or claimed. Women's speech has been said to be more polite, more redundant, more formal, more clearly pronounced and more elaborated and complex, while men's speech is less polite, more elliptical, more informal, less clearly pronounced and simpler.

REFERENCE

- Amanda, C. Venus (2012). Gender differences in writing, Retrieved October 28, from [\(2010\)](http://www.linkinghub.elsevier.com).
- Aslan, O. (2009). *The role of gender and language learning strategies in learning English*. Unpublished Master's thesis.
- Cavas, B. (2010). A study on pre- service class and mathematics teacher's learning styles in Turkey. *Science education International*, 21(1), 47-61.
- Chamot, A.U. (1987). *The learning strategies of ESL students*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall International.

- Demir, T. (2008). Learning styles of the Turkish teaching students (The case of Gazi University). *The Journal of International Social Research*, 1(4), 129-148.
- Ehrman, M., & Oxford R. (1989). Effects of sex differences, career choice, and psychological type on adult language learning strategies. *The Modern Language Journal*, 73, 1-11.
- Ehrlich, S. (1997). Gender as social practice: implications for second language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 19, 421-446.
- Ellis R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Finch, J. (2003). Why be interested in women's position in Academe? *Gender, Work and Organization*. 11 (2), 133-136.
- Gass, S. & Varonis, E. (1986). Sex differences in non-native speaker interactions. In Day, R. (Ed.) *Talking to Learn: Conversation in Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 327-351). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Gorjian, B., Pazhakh, A. R., & Naghizadeh, M. (2012). Comparative study of conjunctive adverbials (CAs) in native researchers' (NRs) and nonnative researchers' (NNRs) experimental articles. *Advances in Asian Social Science*, 1(2), (2012), 224-247.
- Halpern, D. F. (1986). *Sex differences in cognitive abilities*. Cambridge: Cambridge.
- Holmes, J. (2001). *An introduction to sociolinguistics* (2nd Ed.). Harlow, England: Pearson Education.
- Holmes, J. (2013). *An introduction to sociolinguistics* (4th Ed.). Harlow, England: Pearson Education.
- Hugar, Susan (1982). The effect of gender on first and second language use and acquisition. *Applied linguistic*. 21, 17 – 31.
- Oxford R. (1989). The best and the worst: An exercise to tap perceptions of language-Learning experiences and strategies. *Foreign Language Annals*, 22(5), 447-540.
- Oxford R. (1990). Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know Boston: Heinle and Heinle. By university students. *The Modern Language Journal*, 73, 290-297.
- Oxford R, Nyikos M. (1989). Variables affecting choice of language learning strategies.
- Richard, J.C. & Lesley, T. (2007). *Interlanguage language placement test*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
- Shenadeh, A. (1999). Gender differences and equal opportunities in the ESL classroom. *ELT Journal*, 53(4), 256-261.
- Swann, J. (1992). *Girls, Boys and language* Oxford: Blackwell.