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THE EFFECT OF GENDER DIFFERENCES ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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The Effect of Gender Differences on Foreign Language Learning



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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of gender differences on foreign language learning.

Methodology: The study adopted a desktop methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

Findings: The findings revealed that there exists a contextual and methodological gap relating to the effect of gender differences on foreign language learning. Preliminary empirical review revealed that motivation is the overriding factor to consider while interpreting study results. The differences in motivation among males and females of various ability levels and the differential effect of the motivation on individuals belonging to these gender groups are important to decide the kinds of activities that would most benefit all learners. Ability and gender are students 'variables that have not been widely investigated in foreign language studying and less taken together

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The Social Constructivist theory, Socialization theory and the Interactionist theory may be used to anchor future studies relating to the effect of gender differences on foreign language learning. There is need to investigate variables such as ability and gender into the establishment of policy frameworks that enable both genders in the foreign language learning process.

Keywords: *Gender Differences, Learning Foreign Languages, Academic Abilities, Male, Female Learners, Academic Achievement*

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INTRODUCTION

Most recently, evidence has shown that while both boys and girls have improved their performances, girls achieved higher marks than boys in EFL learning. Gender has been regarded as an important affective factor that plays a specific role and influences second language acquisition. There are some differences between the language of men and that of women, and no education or social conditioning can wholly erase these differences. A gender difference is a disparity between male and female (Masoud, 2013).

According to gender role theory, prevalent gender stereotypes are culturally shared expectations for gender appropriate behaviors. Females and males learn the appropriate behaviors and attitudes from the family and overall culture they grow up with, and so non-physical gender differences are a product of socialization (Alunga & Jaluo, 2013). From the biological viewpoint, females and males also differ fundamentally in terms of cognitive ability and learning style. These differences are derived both from basic physiological differences, such as differences in the development of brain, and from differences in higher-level cortical functions. Males and females have somewhat different patterns of lateralization, with males being more left-hemisphere dominant than females (Rahman & Anchassi, 2012). No matter what gender differences are primarily culturally or biologically determined, educational research in the last several decades has proven that the gender differences manifestly influence students' academic interests, needs, and achievements (Wang & Degol, 2017).

However, different educational domains have different claims to the gender issue. The theorists of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) believe that female learners show possible superiority in their second language learning process (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2014). Therefore, whether ESL students leaning English with CALL programs will gain or counteract the learning efficiency due to their gender difference has become a significant issue of ESL instruction.

Takeda and Homberg (2014) conducted a study that investigated the impact of ability level on student performance in a creative reading task. Additionally, the researchers explored the role of gender in conjunction with ability level in relation to these performance differences. The identification of key learner characteristics is essential in optimising the effectiveness of teaching materials and tools.

Scholars have highlighted the potential risk of generating a self-fulfilling prophecy through the dissemination of gender disparities, as well as the perpetuation of partial educational methodologies that exhibit preference towards one gender as opposed to the other (Eliot, 2013). Moreover, scholars contend that the investigation of gender disparities places excessive emphasis on the distinctions between genders while neglecting the variations within genders (Leonhardt & Overå, 2021).

Jiang (2012) argues that despite the potential risks associated with discussing group differences, censorship, including self-censorship, is not conducive to promoting equality. In fact, it may be more hazardous and ineffective than confronting the issue head-on. Stereotypes and prejudice appear to thrive in the absence of empirical investigation, rather than being the result of an open and rigorous scientific inquiry. However, our aim is not to disregard the warnings regarding studies on gender disparities.

As previously mentioned, the issue of gender disparities is not unique. It has been observed that there is a significant distinction between male and female high-achieving adolescent students. The observed incongruity may be attributed to variations in socialisation or disparities in learning preferences and styles. Research on gender differences among gifted students has revealed that female students with exceptional academic abilities may be conditioned to conceal their talents. According to Jungert et al. (2014), female students frequently perceive a need to choose between prioritising their academic pursuits and being perceived as socially valuable.

Studies have indicated that females who possess exceptional academic abilities tend to perform at a lower level than their male counterparts who also possess such abilities. Furthermore, the provision of institutional support for female students at the university level is limited. Even in cases where such support is available, female students tend to underutilize these programmes. The proportion of female learners who are identified as gifted, talented, or highly capable at the elementary level is at least 50%, whereas in junior high school, the percentage of female learners in this category drops to less than 25%. The research highlights that a significant number of intellectually gifted females have had to conceal their aptitudes in order to navigate social situations. This behaviour has been instilled in them by their parents and educators, who have conditioned them to perceive themselves as inferior to males, to steer clear of taking risks, and to have reduced aspirations for achieving success.

Furthermore, it appears that educators of both genders hold a negative perception of women who exhibit the same traits that are positively viewed in academically gifted men. It is possible that there exist variations in learning style preferences based on gender. Male students in junior high school who exhibit high academic aptitude tend to display a preference for tasks that are open-ended in nature. Additionally, when presented with tasks that require a greater degree of creativity, male students with high academic aptitude tend to outperform their female counterparts who possess similar levels of academic aptitude. Several additional factors have been posited to explain the academic performance gap between male and female students who exhibit exceptional intellectual abilities. These include assertiveness, apprehension regarding achievement, and the tendency to attribute one's abilities to external or internal factors. According to Hutchison et al. (2016), female students have demonstrated consistent superiority over male students in the domain of verbal ability.

However, a meta-analysis comprising 165 studies and over a million subjects indicates that scholars have reported minimal gender disparities in seven verbal aptitudes, which include general verbal ability and vocabulary. Likewise, substantial evidence suggests that females exhibit superior language acquisition abilities compared to males (Eriksson et al., 2012). The researchers conducted a study on the acquisition of Irish language among students aged 8 to 14 in Ireland. The mandatory inclusion of Irish as a second language (L2) for all students has afforded scholars the opportunity to examine L2 learners across the full spectrum of abilities, as opposed to being limited to a smaller cohort of students who study a foreign language in nations like the United States. Significant disparities were observed in favour of females, and these differences persisted consistently throughout their secondary education. The authors' conclusions indicate a rejection of the social expectations theory, which posits that females are expected to excel in language learning and that secondary schoolgirls are more aware of conforming to these expectations than

primary schoolgirls. On the contrary, they tend to prioritise the notion that gender disparities stem from biological factors.

In contrast, Drew's (2015) research revealed that males exhibited superior performance compared to females in a series of nine French language assessments. The individual attributed this phenomenon to the presence of male teachers, who served as a positive influence and role model for male students. The influence of teacher role modelling on the academic achievement of male students in foreign language learning was discussed by Clark and Trafford (Heras, 2015). The authors note that while some teachers may overlook the impact of teacher gender on male academic performance, a particular school observed that male students achieved above the national average when taught by male teachers who shared similar interests with them. This was evident in the two highest performing classes in the school.

The research that has been conducted on the topic of gender differences in second language (L2) vocabulary acquisition has yielded inconclusive results. An additional field of inquiry that pertains to our topic is the examination of gender and computer usage. According to previous research, there exists a gender disparity in computer-related interests, with men exhibiting a greater inclination towards this field compared to women. Individuals exhibit increased computer usage and a generally favourable outlook, coupled with reduced levels of anxiety. However, recent studies have indicated that this disparity has decreased, as prior experience has proven to be a more reliable predictor of both attitude and performance than gender.

Research has demonstrated that gender disparities exist in the realm of reading comprehension of second language (L2) text, particularly with respect to variables such as familiarity with the topic, prior knowledge, and level of interest. The study conducted by Sankarakumar *et al.* (2012) revealed that there were variations in the impact of text biases on male and female students during the Dutch national examinations for foreign languages, specifically in the area of reading comprehension for French, English, and German. The study revealed that female students exhibit higher proficiency in subjects related to education, human relations, art, and philosophy, whereas male students tend to excel in topics pertaining to economics and technology, politics, sports, and violence. The widely accepted notion that girls exhibit superior reading skills compared to boys appears to lack empirical support beyond the primary school level. Here, we present an additional conjecture derived from research indicating that male students, particularly those with high aptitude, exhibit greater drive and achieve superior results when tasked with open-ended and imaginative assignments in comparison to their female counterparts. It is not feasible to assert that males attain the status of high ability students primarily through a more imaginative and daring mindset, whereas females are more inclined to achieve this status through diligence and a preference for conventional academic tasks.

The findings presented by Alhums (2021) regarding reading comprehension do not provide evidence to support the claim that female L2 readers outperform their male counterparts. However, the study does reveal that students with average abilities are impeded by the task. It has been determined that both genders are impacted at a similar rate. The reason for the gender factor's influence on vocabulary recall but not on reading comprehension remains uncertain. The impact of motivation on reading comprehension performance may be comparatively lower than that of

vocabulary retention. There appears to be no motivation for students to acquire new vocabulary through reading the given text.

Statement of the Problem

Over the past few decades, scholarly research on gender differences has revealed that there exist certain variations between males and females in terms of their academic accomplishments and preferences. There are researchers who hold the position that studying gender differences is not advisable. The examination of variances in gender is a contentious topic for several valid justifications. Although the gender distinctions are not entirely evident, there seems to be a notable differentiation between male and female individuals within the cohort of highly capable adolescent learners. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the effects of gender differences on foreign language learning (Legewie, 2012)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

Social Constructivist Theory

According to the Social Constructivist Theory, social and cultural factors play a significant role in shaping gender differences in language acquisition. The present theory underscores the significance of socialization, encompassing the messages that juveniles acquire from their families, educational institutions, and the wider community regarding the suitable conduct for males and females. Chaplin (2015)

As per the tenets of Social Constructivist Theory, it is posited that the process of language acquisition may be subject to differential socialization practices based on gender, whereby boys and girls may be exposed to distinct linguistic environments. Diverse cultural values may result in disparate language learning experiences for boys and girls, as certain language proficiencies may be prioritized over others. Males may receive encouragement to exhibit assertiveness and competitiveness, whereas females may receive encouragement to exhibit cooperative and nurturing behaviours. The language learning experiences of students can be influenced by gender differences, as research suggests that boys may exhibit more assertiveness and participation in classroom discussions, while girls may display more cooperative and supportive behaviours towards their peers (Shi & Langman, 2012).

Furthermore, the Social Constructivist Theory posits that the media and popular culture may exert an influence on gender disparities in language acquisition. The portrayal of gender stereotypes in various forms of media such as movies, television shows, and literature may have an impact on the self-perception and language learning abilities of both male and female individuals. According to Gleason et al. (2017), male characters who are depicted as confident and successful may be more relatable to boys, whereas female characters who exhibit nurturing and supportive traits may be more relatable to girls.

In general, the Social Constructivist Theory emphasises the significance of analysing the social and cultural elements that give rise to disparities in language acquisition based on gender. Through comprehension of these variables, educators and guardians can collaborate to establish language

learning settings that are more comprehensive, fostering the academic success of all pupils, irrespective of their gender.

Interactionist Theory

Interactionist Theory proposes that gender differences in language learning are influenced by the way boys and girls interact with others and communicate (Carli & Bukatko, 2012). This theory suggests that boys and girls may have different communication styles and preferences, which can impact their language learning experiences. For example, some studies have found that girls may be more likely to use language to build relationships and establish connections with others, while boys may be more focused on conveying information and achieving their goals. Girls may also be more likely to use indirect language and nonverbal cues, while boys may prefer direct and assertive language (Everitt et al., 2016).

According to Interactionist Theory, these differences in communication styles can impact how boys and girls approach language learning. Girls may be more likely to collaborate and work together, which can facilitate language learning through peer interaction and feedback. Boys, on the other hand, may be more likely to engage in competitive and individualistic language learning activities, such as language games or memorization drills (Lai, 2016)

Moreover, Interactionist Theory suggests that the way teachers and parents interact with boys and girls can also impact their language learning experiences. For example, teachers may unintentionally reinforce gender stereotypes by giving boys more opportunities to speak in class or by using more aggressive or assertive language with boys. This can discourage girls from participating and lead to gender differences in language learning outcomes.

Socialization Theory

Socialization Theory suggests that gender differences in language learning are primarily the result of the socialization experiences that children have as they grow up. This theory proposes that boys and girls are socialized differently by their families, peers, and society at large, which can impact their attitudes, behaviors, and learning outcomes (Chaplin, 2015).

For example, Socialization Theory suggests that girls are often encouraged to develop their language skills more than boys (Fagot, 2012). This may be because girls are traditionally seen as nurturing and communicative, while boys are seen as more physically active and competitive. As a result, girls may be given more opportunities to practice and develop their language skills, such as through conversations with friends, reading, and writing.

Moreover, Socialization Theory suggests that gender stereotypes can also impact the way teachers and parents interact with boys and girls in language learning contexts (Ely & Gleason, 2017). For example, teachers may be more likely to call on boys to answer questions or provide feedback, while girls may be overlooked or encouraged to be quiet. This can lead to gender differences in language learning outcomes, as boys may receive more practice and feedback, while girls may be discouraged from participating.

Socialization Theory highlights the importance of understanding the social and cultural factors that contribute to gender differences in language learning. By creating learning environments that are

inclusive and supportive of all students, regardless of gender, educators and parents can help to ensure that all students have the opportunity to develop strong language skills.

Empirical Review

Iwaniec (2019) conducted a study on language learning motivation and gender: a case of Poland. The present survey study investigates gender-based disparities among a cohort of 599 adolescent Polish students, aged 14-16, who are learning English. The results indicate that the female participants obtained higher scores than their male counterparts on the measures of international orientation, ideal second language self, and self-regulation. There was a lack of observed gender differences in the areas of instrumentality, self-efficacy beliefs, English self-concept, and intrinsic motivation. A notable distinction exists in the degree of association between self-regulation and instrumentality, self-efficacy beliefs, and English self-concept. The findings suggest that the impact of gender is more far-reaching than what has been documented in prior studies.

Ping Ho (2016) sought to investigate gender based differences in language learning strategies among undergraduates in a Malaysian public university. The present research examined the language learning strategies employed by first-year undergraduate students at a public university in Malaysia. The study also investigated the correlation between language acquisition tactics and gender. The study employed the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1990) to collect data from a sample of 535 male and 1173 female participants. The data was subjected to analysis using various statistical techniques including descriptive statistics, t-test, One-way ANOVA, and chi-square test. The results of the study indicated that females utilised a greater number of strategies in comparison to males. The findings of the study indicate that the undergraduates in question heavily utilised metacognitive strategies, while the employment of affective strategies was comparatively low. Subsequent ANOVA analysis indicated a statistically significant distinction among the language acquisition techniques employed by the undergraduate participants.

Moazen (2016) investigated the perception of Iranian EFL (English as a foreign language) learners regarding the use of communication strategies in their English learning efforts. The study's objective was to investigate whether gender influenced learners' perceptions of communication strategy usage. The researchers conducted a study by selecting a sample of 60 students and subsequently dividing them into two distinct groups, namely the control group and the experimental group. Every cohort comprised of 30 pupils, with an equal distribution of 15 male and 15 female students. The data collection method employed by the researcher involved the utilisation of a self-report questionnaire, specifically Dornyei and Scott's (1997) inventory of CSs. Upon conducting a T-test statistical analysis, it was determined that the instruction of communication strategies had a significant impact on the learners' perception. Specifically, those who reported a higher frequency of utilising communication strategies exhibited a greater effect (mean score of 19.93 in the experimental group compared to 15.69 in the control group). Furthermore, the data that was analysed through the utilisation of a chi-square test indicated that females exhibited superior performance in the implementation of communication strategies, irrespective of the treatment they were subjected to, as compared to males.

Viriya (2014) conducted a study on the gender differences in language learning styles and language learning strategies. The objective of this study is to examine the disparities in language learning

style and language learning strategies between genders. The research employed the Perceptual Learning-Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ) to examine the learning style preferences of first-year university students at the Faculty of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Thailand. Additionally, the study utilised the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) version 7.0, developed by Oxford (1990), to determine the learning strategy preferences of the participants. A total of 150 learners were subjected to these assessments. The findings suggest that gender exerts an influence on language learning style, while no discernible impact is observed on language learning strategies. The presentation of the results' implications for language teachers and learners is also included.

Zoghi (2013) conducted a study on the effect of gender on language learning. The objective of this research is to investigate the impact of gender on the results of an English as a foreign language (EFL) proficiency assessment administered to young adult learners at the Iran Language Institute (ILI) in 2013, specifically at the conclusion of RUN2. The objective of this investigation was to ascertain whether the gender of students has an impact on the acquisition of English as a second language. The study comprised of a sample of 100 secondary school students who were selected from four distinct classes. The sample consisted of 50 male and 50 female participants. The utilised methodologies involved quantitative techniques for analysis, including descriptive analysis, pair t-test, and effect size. The findings suggest that there exists a correlation between gender and the acquisition of English as a foreign language, and that this relationship has a noteworthy impact on performance outcomes in achievement assessments. The findings of this research aid educators in making informed decisions regarding their pedagogical approaches with respect to the gender of their students.

Kayaoğlu (2012) attempted to explore the influence of gender on language strategy use. The study comprised a cohort of 115 students specializing in science. The survey methodology was employed as the primary means of gathering data. The findings suggest that female students exhibited greater utilisation of strategies. To be more precise, it was observed that female students exhibited a higher frequency of utilisation of the five primary categories of strategies, namely memory, compensation, cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategy categories.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a desktop methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

FINDINGS

This study presents both a contextual and methodological gap.

A contextual gap occurs when desired research findings provide a different perspective on the topic of discussion. For instance, Viriya (2014) conducted a study on the gender differences in language learning styles and language learning strategies. This paper seeks to investigate the gender differences in language learning style and language learning strategies. The study used the

perceptual learning-style preference questionnaire (PLSPQ) to investigate the learning style preferences and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) version 7.0 designed by Oxford (1990) to find the learning strategy preferences of first year University students at the faculty of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Thailand. These were administered to 150 learners. The findings indicated that gender does not have effects on language learning styles but there is no effect on language learning strategies. On the other hand, the focus of our current study was the gender differences in foreign language learning.

Secondly, this study also presented a methodological gap, that is, for instance, Viriya (2014) adopted the perceptual learning-style preference questionnaire (PLSPQ) to investigate the learning style preferences and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) version 7.0 designed by Oxford (1990) to find the learning strategy preferences of first year University students at the faculty of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Thailand- in his study on the gender differences, whereas our current study adopted a desk study literature review methodology.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, it can be inferred that motivation plays a crucial role in the interpretation of study findings. Schwabe (2015) highlights the significance of discerning the variations in motivation between males and females across diverse ability levels, as well as the distinct impact of motivation on individuals belonging to these gender groups. This knowledge is crucial in determining the most advantageous activities for all learners. The variables of ability and gender have not been extensively researched in the context of foreign language acquisition, particularly when considered in conjunction with one another. Notwithstanding the potential hazards of overemphasizing gender disparities, our study underscores the significance of endeavoring to align language learning activities with the unique needs of individual learners for optimal outcomes. These topics hold significant importance for future research.

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