

An Historical Look at Gender in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract: The role that gender plays with respect to language learning in the classroom is ripe for investigation. Some educators and researchers maintain that females possess superior language skills. This author argues that ideas regarding female language superiority are suspect and may encourage discriminatory pedagogy for women as well as men.

Gender has been used as a basis for English as a second language (ESL) research and has been found, in some cases, to reflect female superiority in language. Studies have found that gender difference manifests itself in how teachers teach in the ESL classroom. Some scholars question whether gender is a worthy subject to study at all and whether, in fact, females have superior language skills. In this paper, the role that gender plays in learning is investigated. It is hypothesized that females do not, in fact, have better L2, or second language skills, than males.

Literature Review

The following chronological literature review of eight articles investigates this hypothesis and demonstrates that, despite existing research on the topic, it is not possible to conclude that superior ESL skills exist in either gender.

Sex Differences in Second Language Learning?

Ekstrand (1980) reports a paucity of studies about sex differences in L2 learning, and data on sex and foreign language acquisition is nonexistent. Nevertheless, Ekstrand later contradicts himself when he reports “consistent superiority of girls in all variables” (p. 209). According to these studies, “Girls are superior to boys in all the French and English tests but also in other achievement tests, at least in the initial data” (p. 209). Ekstrand’s contradiction is a sign of the overall contradictory nature of gender study. Such contradictions are replete throughout the data and echo the general societal confusion about male and female abilities. Ekstrand later calls into question his own report about female superiority when he states that there are large problems in data and interpretation of findings. He goes on to say that the differences that do appear are quite small. Ekstrand concludes that the same study “does not warrant any safe conclusions regarding sex differences in L2 learning” (p. 210).

After reporting other studies with murky findings, Ekstrand (1980) considers it “astonishing” (p. 211) that sex differences in L2 learning have not been the recipient of larger studies. He attributes the lack of larger studies to opinions that favor the superiority of females in L1 learning and, therefore, the assumption that female superiority would also exist in L2 learning. Ekstrand questions the uncertainty of the assumption of female superiority in L1 learning and, if there is one, whether it would apply only to certain areas of language learning. He also argues that the connection between female L1 and L2 superiority is tenuous at best. However, if one accepts the existence of Norm Chomsky’s critical period hypothesis—the hypothesis that there are specific times in childhood when language is programmed to be learned—there is at least one similarity between L1 and L2 acquisition at young ages. In other words, the critical period hypothesis states that L1 language and L2 acquisition are best accomplished by children. In fact, there have been instances when adolescents who were not exposed to language at a young age were unable to adequately acquire language at all. Therefore,

there may be at least one connection between female L1 and L2 childhood acquisition. That said, this does not obviate the need for more gender/language study, especially in view of the fact that the existence of Chomsky's critical period hypothesis is hotly debated.

Gender Differences are Disappearing

Alan Feingold of Yale University conjectures that female superiority is not the important issue for discussion but that sex differences are inconsequential and diminishing. According to Feingold (1988), gender differences were found from 1947 to 1983, but they were small and declined throughout that same period. Differences encompassed higher scores made by girls on grammar, spelling, and perceptual speed; boys scored higher on spatial visualization, high school mathematics, and mechanical aptitude. Feingold reports that there were no gender differences in verbal reasoning, arithmetic, and figural reasoning. Even though his essay does not address the causes for the differences or the diminishment, he states that the differences have been linked to, among other things, attitudes. He calls for further research into the matter. Ekstrand (1980) reported that girls had more positive attitudes than boys about the study of an L2. Although it is difficult to establish a link between attitudes and learning, most teachers would subjectively testify to the merging of positive attitudes toward learning and increased effort with successful learning. In addition, beliefs and motivation are closely correlated with attitudes (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). If a student perceives that there is value in learning a second language, they will be more motivated to obtain it.

Should We Stop Studying Sex Differences Altogether?

Baumeister (1988) states that gender studies may not be productive ground for research because sex differences may be used as a basis for female discrimination and oppression. Baumeister acknowledges that research aligned by gender was initially valuable in a world where researchers only considered males and then rashly intuited how the same research concerned women. He hypothesizes that, when considering the feminist view that discrimination pervades society, there may be a need to discontinue or, at least, limit sex differences research. However, the more important determination from this author's perspective is this: If one is fearful of discrimination by taking into account gender, one cannot address the lingering discrimination that still exists against females. Society continues to assign discriminatory gender roles to females, and the expectation that females learn second languages in superior ways relegates them to a different status than men and may, in fact, place extraordinarily high expectations upon those females who do not excel. In addition, research into language vis-à-vis gender can result in pedagogy that may benefit both genders.

Sex Differences in Second-Language Ability

Lynn and Wilson (1993) return to the theme of ascertaining and reporting differences in a study of Irish children learning Irish as a second language. Very little difference was found between male and female intelligence. However, they report, for tests on the L2, girls scored significantly higher on 21 of the 24 comparisons, but this advantage only occurred in children under nine years of age. The fact that an increase did not express itself in children from ages 9 to 13, according to Lynn and Wilson, invalidates the opinion that better scores obtained by females are linked to social expectations. Lynn and Wilson conclude that if differences were attributable to social expectations, an increase would be apparent from pre-puberty to post-puberty. Therefore, they conclude that the differences are probably attributable to a biological basis. In this author's opinion, the two researchers do not support such a leap in judgment; they arrive at a biological explanation without any convincing evidence. Social expectations, beliefs, and

attitudes are so powerful that one cannot globally discount them. In addition, if sex differences do exist, whether they are biological or not is a controversial topic.

Differential Teacher Treatment-by-Gender in the EFL Classroom

The linking of gender, as a social construction, and social expectations is discussed further in the article by Sunderland (1994). In spite of what she says are social expectations that girls are better at language, teachers treat students differently in non-English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. On the whole, boys receive more attention, both positive and negative, than girls. This prioritizing of males supports the author's view that female discrimination exists. However, because of a lack of research in L2 learning and teacher/student interaction, it is unclear whether these differences occur in the EFL classroom as well (Sunderland, 1994). Sunderland concludes that with gender viewed as a social construction, some type of differential treatment probably occurs in a mixed-sex L2 heterogeneous classroom, whether favoring male or female. In this author's opinion, despite lack of agreement about the cause of differential treatment, such treatment exists. What is unclear is how this treatment affects performance.

When Sunderland analyzes the EFL findings that do exist, she hypothesizes that if girls are thought to be better at language and at L2, is it not logical to assume that this would affect teachers' behaviors with girls being asked more challenging questions and getting as much attention, if not more, than boys? In Sunderland's limited study of 7 EFL students, she found that 4 students reported differences: (a) teachers expected more from girls as far as written work and politeness; (b) girls were called upon more when no one raised their hand; and (c) girls received more praise and encouragement. Some of these findings are suspect, however, when she also reports that, at other times, female students were more often ignored.

The stated reasons for this perceived imbalance are interesting. One student reported that, in his perception, boys were asked harder questions to threaten them; another reported that it was to punish the boys. One female student opined that it was to preserve the males' egos. In other words, rather than harder questions indicating more interest or more expectations for success, according to this limited sample, the harder questions had a negative tone. Sunderland concludes that "the social construction of gender being what it is, it is unlikely that differential teacher treatment will ever not be a feature of a mixed-sex classroom," ESL or not. This author agrees.

Sex Differences in Foreign Language Text Comprehension

Bugel and Buunk (1996), likewise, consider gender as a product of socialization. They report that females in the Netherlands, despite the fact that they have equal or better academic performance in language learning in early years, consistently score lower on national foreign language examinations. Bugel and Buunk test the hypothesis that examination differences are due to the subject matter of the test and find that females "do better on questions about human relations, education, care, art, and philosophy; males do better on economic and technological topics, politics, sports, and violence" (p. 16). Thus, preferences with regard to reading choices are relegated to gender and, moreover, these preferences influence girls' performance on standardized testing. Again, because of cultural and social expectations, the researchers report that girls choose topics that are considered to be *female* or *feminine*. Furthermore, the study tracked expected differences in female and male topics which reflected deeper differences in girls' and boys' knowledge and interests. One wonders how much sexist attitudes, on the part of the researchers, come into play. It would be worthwhile to conduct research on this topic with respect to standardized testing in the United States.

Gender as Social Practice: Implications for Second Language Acquisition

Susan Ehrlich (1997) agrees that gender is a social construction when she reports that it is not a fixed identity but one that is in flux, depending upon the social community within which it is expressed. To support this view, Ehrlich refers to prior sociolinguistic research in gender and language that does view gender identity as a fluid construction. She explains further that feminist sociolinguists “[have] generally rejected the idea that gender is a set of attributes residing permanently within an individual. More recent conceptions of gender characterize it as something individuals do as opposed to something individuals are or have” (p. 422). Ehrlich explains further that, rather than language reflecting identity, language constitutes identity. In other words, language transgresses identity boundaries.

In addition, Ehrlich (1997) calls for classroom community to be considered as a major factor in investigating gender differences in L2 learning. Further, she challenges studies that find female superiority without taking into account the social, cultural, and situational contexts in which second languages are acquired. Ehrlich concludes that generalizations about gender and L2 learning are both speculative, including the paradigm of female superiority vis-à-vis language, and difficult to maintain. Further, she emphatically states that it is not gender that interacts with language but “gendered social practices” (p. 440). Therefore, gender is conflated with the social world within which it is expressed. In this author’s view, environment cannot help but be an influence.

Differences in Men’s and Women’s ESL Writing at the Junior College Level

Just as Bugel and Buunk found that one factor, topic selection, influences test results, Morris (1998) has conjectured one particular factor as being responsible for superior scores on ESL writing by female students in Quebec. Echoing Ehrlich, this single factor is formed from the social fabric. Morris states that women at all levels outperform males in ESL classes. The females’ superior performance, however, is not with respect to linguistic abilities. Differences are found in the degree to which female students adhere to writing assignment guidelines in an academic setting where adherence to assignments is richly rewarded. This author suspects that Morris’ findings are colored by the perception that females are, or should be, compliant.

Morris extends her finding to the ESL classrooms. She opines that the reason for female success is, again, socially determined: Females follow instructions better, comply with rules, use learning strategies better, and aim to please the teacher more than males. Morris offers that these social qualities in the ESL classroom, or any classroom for that matter, may be construed by teachers as signs of academic superiority. This author argues that in order to obtain reliable data, researchers have to be fully aware of their own preconceptions with regard to gender behavior.

Morris (1998) concludes that grading rubrics should not focus so much on assignment adherence but on “communicative proficiency” (p. 235). Higher grades for girls may not be beneficial. In fact, girls were being short-changed because they did not receive feedback about their ESL skills and boys were being short-changed because the grading guidelines leaned heavily toward assignment adherence. Mastery of subject matter was not being prioritized and, thus, both genders were not receiving productive ESL feedback. It is useful to remember that discrimination and gender typing can negatively influence both genders.

Conclusions

Further research should be done regarding gender differences in the ESL classroom with an eye to developing pedagogies that benefit both genders. Indeed, Baumeister’s concerns about female oppression must be considered. However, in this case, this author argues that the benefits of research outweigh the risks. Baumeister’s essay was written in 1988, and there have been

many encouraging trends against female discrimination since then which supplants fear about sexism resulting from publication of research data. Furthermore, it appears that whether female L2 superiority exists is a weighty issue, is important, and is far from determined. If females are found to be better language learners, it is this author's belief that their abilities will not be solely due to biology, if they are at all. Thus, when it is found how females achieve their language superiority, teachers could use these research results to inform their pedagogy in a manner that helps both genders. The skills and strategies that females use in some areas could be extended to other areas where they are not utilized, and the same skills and strategies could be taught to male students. These pedagogies would reduce educational discrimination and benefit English language learner males and females alike.

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