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GENDER AND FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract: The given article is about language acquisition in gender difference. Although children's living environments differ in thousands of ways and experiences in physics and intelligence are totally different, these differences don't influence their acquisition of mother tongue at all. Differences between male and female L1 learners appear more in studies conducted in bilingual settings; and such studies favor female learners in acquiring the languages they are exposed to.

Keywords. Children, study, knowledge, difference, mother, tongue, acquisition, language, ability, despite, their, different, language, environments.

General acceptance about children's way of learning their mother tongue is quite straightforward; it is natural and without striking a blow. There is always difference in talent when children study other knowledge, for example, some children are good at mathematics, while others have a talent for physics. However, there is little difference in mother tongue acquisition. Although children's living environments differ in thousands of ways and experiences in physics and intelligence are totally different, these differences don't influence their acquisition of mother tongue at all. Five or six-year-olds, regardless of their gender, have the same language ability roughly despite their different language environments. It's easy for children to learn their mother tongue and acquire language ability unconsciously. However, there are also several studies of first language acquisition that have shown girls to be better learners than boys. Trudgill showed that women used the prestige variants more frequently than men and related this phenomenon to female social insecurity. Differences between male and female L1 learners appear more in studies conducted in bilingual settings; and such studies favor female learners in acquiring the languages they are exposed to. In a study of Punjabi migrant children in England, Agnihotri showed that girls assimilated the prestige variants faster than the boys; they were also better at resisting the stigmatised variants. Satyanath too found that Kannadiga women in Delhi showed a higher percentage of assimilation of linguistic features associated with Hindi and also a higher degree of usage than men. He found that younger women assimilated the host society's language and culture maximally. Unlike Trudgill, who holds social insecurity to be responsible for greater use of prestige variants, Satyanath attributes it to the sociocultural aspects of the Kannadiga community which provides women a greater opportunity of interaction with the host society and this seems to be the underlying reason in female learners outscoring their counterparts.

Second Language Acquisition, which is a subarea of applied linguistics, has become a genuine field of research for the last three decades. Previously, the research of gender and SLA basically focused on the topics valued in the area of SLA; nevertheless, with

the change of perspectives it started to investigate the teachers and the learners more. In the previous period, only such studies that were based on positivist or postpositivist assumptions were respected by many scholars. As states, real science meant only experimental or quasiexperimental design, surveys, and postpositivist qualitative studies to such scholars; and assuming only this hierarchy as the real track to follow neglects the wide range of contributions made through other paradigms (including gender) and excludes research participants' diverse experiences, "thereby creating conditions for inaccurate, inequitable and discriminatory outcomes".

Such a hierarchy of predetermined research approaches, topics and participants, also, has the potential to cause discriminatory results against the teachers. Lin et al. (2004) explains the way that educators face "systematic, institutional suppression of research and teaching on minority and diversity issues". They state that "senior staff identified research by minority scholars on marginalized groups-as opposed to the adult, middle-class, and white populations that have dominated SLA literature-as 'repetitive' and 'trivial". Even though some significant SLA theorists believe that SLA researchers began to ask the right question, investigating these questions in a scientific way and accumulating results that allow them to further refine and make adjustments to existing theories, if we look closer how questions are related to gender have been explored, we cannot say that it is definitely the case. As Jim?n?z-Catal?n utters, individual differences such as age, aptitude, learning style and motivation are very-well focused on in most SLA research studies, but gender is often ignored. Besides, as Ehrlich and Sunderland points out, even in studies where gender was included into research, it was perceived in an oversimplified way.

In his prominent work *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*, Rod Ellis devotes only a few pages to gender in a section entitled "sex", that is included in the section of "Social factors and second language acquisition". He shortly discusses the difference between the terms "sex" and "gender" and mentions the two principles Labov suggested:

1. In stable sociolinguistic stratification, men use a higher frequency of nonstandard forms than women
2. In the majority of linguistic changes, women use a higher frequency of the incoming forms than men.

Then he turns Labov's generalizations into an hypothesis that follows as "women might be better at L2 learning than men as they are likely to be more open to new linguistic forms in the L2 input and they will be more likely to rid themselves of interlanguage forms that deviate from target-language norms". Ellis then cites two studies, Burstall's research in England on primary school students of French and Boyle's research in Hong Kong on university students of English. Either of these studies reveals that female students were more successful than male students in the exams applied. However, Ellis does not reach conclusive results on these findings; he states that such generalizations might be misleading as Boyle's study also indicated higher achievement of male students in listening tests and the study by Bacon of university students of Spanish in the US

found no such significant difference between boys and girls.

Achievement is not the only aspect that Ellis cites. He discusses attitudes towards language learning and learning strategies which are directly related to gender. About the attitudes issue, Ellis cites studies that resolve that both boys and girls can be more instrumentally motivated than the other group for the reasons that affect their instrumental motivations. Similarly, Ludwig found that male university students of German, French and Spanish in the US were more instrumentally motivated than female students, and according to Gardner and Lambert's study, female students of L2 French in Canada were more motivated than the male students and also had more positive attitudes towards the speakers of the target language. Bacon and Finnemann found that female university students of Spanish in the US were more instrumentally motivated than male students. About the learning strategies, Gass and Varonis's study of university students of English as a second language is cited to support the notion that "men use the opportunities to interact to produce more output, whereas women use it to obtain more input". However, Teresa Pica study of adult learners of English in the US indicated no significant differences in interaction strategies. According to Ellis' review, there was nothing conclusive in studies of gender differences in SLA in achievement, attitudes and strategy use at that time. As a result, Ellis concluded the section about gender as follows:

Sex is, of course, likely to interact with other variables in determining L2 proficiency. It will not always be the case, therefore, that females outperform males. Asian men in Britain generally attain higher levels of proficiency in L2 English than do Asian women for the simple reason that their jobs bring them into contact with the majority English speaking group, while women are often "enclosed" in the home.

Sex interacts with such factors as age, ethnicity, and, in particular social class. Several other SLA texts published at about the same time reveal that gender is neither listed in the index nor discussed in anything but a passing manner by any of these authors.

Looking at articles published in specialized SLA and general applied linguistics journals, we find that gender in SLA has been dealt within two very distinct ways in research:

In mainstream SLA, that is research exploring issues such as how interaction relates to SLA or the role of Universal Grammar in SLA or the role of general cognitive mechanisms in SLA, gender is usually perceived to be the synonym for biological sex, and despite being mentioned during the discussion of research methodology, it is seldom returned to during the data analysis stage.

The research done by Mackey et al is fairly typical of research published in specialist SLA journals. It has a general interest in the potential contribution to SLA of interactional feedback provided by a more competent interlocutor to a less competent interlocutor in the course of a conversational interaction. According to the authors, to investigate the relationship, it is first necessary to examine the extent to which such feedback is actually perceived as such by those to whom it is provided. One source of evidence of this influence is to be found in the exchanges themselves: the researchers examine a

stretch of discourse and reach an agreement as to whether or not it contains an example of interactional feedback and if it does, what type of interactional feedback it is and, more importantly, the effect it has on the linguistic structure of the exchange. Another source of evidence for the perception of interactional feedback as interactional feedback is to be found in post-task accounts of what happened provided by the learner.

So as to investigate these issues, the researchers video recorded two groups of language students as they were on a spot-the-differences tasks. One of the groups consisted of 10 learners of English from diverse L1 backgrounds and the other had American students of Italian. The students, then, were asked to generate stimulated recalls as they watched the records of their interactions. During these stimulated recalls, learners were asked to comment on those points in the activity when they were exposed to interactional feedback.

The concept of gender has been dealt with a significantly different approach in social-psychological research. However, most of the studies have traditionally over generalized the notions and the results found in the studies. Nevertheless, it is in research which is more sociolinguistically oriented, where gender has been dealt with more robustly, as an aspect of identity inextricably interwoven with other aspects of identity such as nationality and ethnicity, and as an important factor in the process of SLA.

Talbut and Stewart's (1999) study is the first example where gender and identity issues were more important than SLA issues. In that study, the researcher focused on an African American university student on a five-week study abroad program in Spain. The program combined language and culture classes with informal socializing. The subject of the study had a middle class background and had been raised in a white setting. She accepted that she had already experienced racism in her life in the United States, and she had an expectation of not encountering a similar racist discrimination in Spain.

Nevertheless, at the end of her first week in her new setting, she stated that she was already disappointed to be in Spain. The reason why she was so disappointed was the comments of males in the streets of the city. As she walked by them, they made negative comments on her appearance and sexuality. The study indicated that the issues relating to socialization, ethnicity and gender are very important in SLA research and further investigation of the concepts is necessary.

A relatively new research study was conducted by Hruska (2004), who investigated second language development among minority students while practicing as an ESL kindergarten teacher. The study was a year-long ethnographic study conducted in an English dominant kindergarten in the United States. The classroom was composed of Spanish-bilingual English language learners and native English speakers. The base for the study was a theoretical framework that views language as the site for constructing social meaning and negotiating power. According to Fairclough (1989), such theory provides the foundation for asking questions about the interaction which moves beyond a strictly linguistic focus. Data collection followed standard ethnographic procedures,

including prolonged engagement, persistent observation and triangulation to ensure the credibility of interpretations. The researcher conducted one to three 20- to 45-minute observations daily and videotaped at least two observations per week. The study demonstrated how relationships and interaction mediated through local gender constructions support and constrained English language learners' classroom participation. Based on these results, the author concludes that local gender ideologies operating in second language (L2) learning contexts affect students' access to the interactions that they need to develop a second language. Consequently, gender cannot be perceived as a fixed independent variable which always results in generalizable outcomes. In other words, her ethnographic study described how gender ideologies, gender constructions, and behaviors related to it interacted with bilingualism, ethnicity and friendships in ways that emphasized unequal power relations or shaped participation in classroom events, which, affected the students' second language development.



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