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MARS OR VENUS? GENDER DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE LEARNING: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY ON LANGUAGE AND GENDER

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Abstract

The question of how men and women learn and produce a foreign language differently has been a striking area to examine in the fields of Sociolinguistics and ESL. Foreign language teaching should aim at helping both genders acquire and improve skills to produce language effectively rather than merely concentrating on learning target grammar structures and vocabulary.

Learning strategies used by male and female learners identify and shape the way they learn and acquire real-life skills. This paper addresses the differences in strategies used by male and female English language learners. The research question I will be discussing and elaborating on will be: How can we help learners succeed language learning process by considering gender differences and how can we raise awareness of these differences in language acquisition in order to plan and design courses to better meet learner needs and interests?

In this project, I will be looking at the popular stereotypes and the Women's Movement starting in the 1970s together with the Feminist Linguistic Activism to reveal and clarify more effective ways to help learners improve language skills. I will also present and discuss Sexism in

educational materials and language practices to explore the commonalities across speech communities and to minimize the effects of the differences in language teaching.

My research is an empirical research which concentrates on the classroom applications. I hope to help instructors choose non-sexist alternatives to increase the effectiveness of teaching both genders and assist them in designing more effective courses.

Keywords

Gender, Language Learning Strategies, Communicative Competence, Sexism

1. Introduction

To better analyze how men and women learn a second language differently, it is important to see the connection between language learning and sociolinguistics at the forefront of this discussion. There clearly are differences in how different genders acquire and perceive a second language; however, one should examine the ways in which the sexes choose to deal with these differences and the issues and/or facts that arise from the structure of that language (sexism in language). In the case of English language learning, some claim that English is a “sexist” language that paves the way to heat the discussion.

Many studies have proven that there are differences in the way men and women learn a foreign language. Men and women use various strategies when learning a language; furthermore, the strategies they use affect the way they learn a language helping them achieve success. It is important for the learners to be conscientious of the variety of these strategies and to be able to choose the ones that best work for them.

Male and female users of language also differ in the way they produce language and express themselves. There exist some popular stereotypes which claim that men tend to dominate when expressing an opinion and women tend to be supportive or agree with what men say. Other examples center around the idea that women use a more sensitive and descriptive language than men do which affects the way they acquire a foreign language.

As educators, it is significant to identify and recognize these differences and plan lessons accordingly to better meet learner needs and expectations. When teachers have a clearer idea about how learners approach language learning, what strategies they use, and what their strengths and weaknesses are, language teaching would be beneficial for all types of learners and both sexes.

2. Male - Female Differences

There clearly are physiological differences between men and women. Men tend to be more muscular and women are not as strong and weigh less. The physical differences lead the way to less visible characteristic differences namely in language. It is commonly known that the female voice is more verbal than the male voice. Although there are social factors and different ways of upbringing that cause these differences, it would not be wrong to claim that there sometimes is a clear distinction among men's speech and women's speech. Even though both sexes speak the same language, the particularities do not necessarily "result in two 'separate' or 'different' languages, but rather one language with noticeable sex-based characteristics." (Wardhaugh, 1992, p. 313) These characteristics usually appear in the areas of phonology, morphology, and vocabulary. At the early stages of childhood, girls and boys learn how to speak 'appropriately' by identifying themselves within their social environment. By showing a "sex-appropriate linguistic behavior, [they learn how to be] a 'proper' girl or a 'proper' boy" (Coates, 1986, p.122) as they acquire a **gender identity**. In the field of sex differences, one of the popular beliefs is "girls' superiority over boys in the acquisition of speech." (Coates, 1986, p.122) Girls acquire a language and start to state opinions earlier than boys do. Many studies have also proved that "at any given age, girls will be found to be superior in terms of comprehension, size of vocabulary, reading ability, handling of complex expressions such as modals". (Coates, 1986, p.122)

Adult speakers of a language also show differences among each other. One typical example of vocabulary differences might be "the way women use color words like *mauve*, *beige*, *aquamarine*, *lavender*, and *magenta*" (Wardhaugh, 1992, p. 315) which most men do not. While using adjectives, women tend to be more enthusiastic by choosing words such as "*adorable*, *charming*, *divine*, *lovely*, and *sweet*" (Wardhaugh, 1992, p. 315) which are used less commonly by men. Therefore, it can be argued that women tend to use a more sensitive and descriptive language when giving an opinion compared to that of men.

The further linguistic inquiry has also indicated that women use a more polite and formal language than men do. This might be because of the inclination to gain a secure status through how women present themselves in the society. Lakoff suggests that there are some traits that are characteristic to women's language; "they build up a 'style' in which women express themselves hesitantly, tentatively, weakly, trivializingly, "politely" ...women feel unsure of themselves."

(Coates, 1988, p. 81) A study carried out among a group of boys and girls in Philadelphia found that there were differences in the ways boys and girls use imperative sentences. While boys tended to use many imperative sentences, it was observed that girls used “let’s” patterns more.

“Example:

Boy: Give me an apple!

Girl: Would you give me an apple?

Boy: It’s time to go.

Girl: Let’s go.”

(Xia, 2013, p. 3)

Another result the research revealed was that “girls prefer to use sentences with modal verbs, such as can, could, may...To reduce the imperative tone, they use more adverbs like maybe, perhaps, probably”. (Xia, 2013, p.3) This illustration can help language teachers design courses bearing in mind the differences between both genders.

In language learning, there are different strategies and styles that learners use to better help them with acquiring a foreign language and mastering it effectively. It is argued that “Good language learners use a large number of effective learning strategies, unlike the less successful learners (Hosenfeld, 1977). They put their heart and soul into identifying themselves clearly and therefore can select the right strategy for themselves. Learner strategies are represented through the field of what is called “glottodidactics”, which defines these strategies as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, and more transferrable to new situations of language learning and use.” (Bozinovic & Sindik, 2011, p.5) Good language learners have the ability to choose the best strategies to plan and regulate their learning processes. Successful learners have the means for practicing various strategies and they manage to select and combine appropriate strategies. American psychologist Rebecca Oxford constructed the *SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning)* in 1990, one of the most well-known instruments for measuring learning strategies. Oxford proposed six categories of learning strategies as memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. The main goal of these strategies is to improve the communicative competence allowing learners to become autonomous learners who are responsible for their own learning. In 1990, Rebecca Oxford’s SILL questionnaire was used as a survey to identify gender differences regarding how frequently language learning strategies are used. 72 males and 109 females studying at the

American College of Management and Technology in Dubrovnik participated in the survey, the results of which showed that “memory strategies are the most frequently used, while cognitive strategies are the less frequently used by the respondents.” (Bozinovic & Sindik, 2011, p.14) Except for the socio-affective strategies, females used all types of strategies more frequently than males did.

Table 1: *Descriptive statistics for dimensions of learning strategies*

Learning strategies	M	SD	Min	Max
Memory strategies	2.3112	.2806	1.36	2.91
Socio-affective strategies	2.1905	.3376	1.00	3.00
Metacognitive strategies	1.8765	.3318	.92	2.75
Cognitive strategies	1.8020	.3972	1.00	2.90

(Bozinovic & Sindik, 2011, p.14)

In 1989, Oxford and Nyikos observed 1200 adult language learners on how they use learning strategies and concluded that “women tend to deploy all types of strategies more frequently.” (Bozinovic & Sindik, 2011, p.11)

In another research on self-regulated learning which was carried out by Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons in 1990, 45 boys and 45 girls were asked to describe their learning strategies. It was found that there were differences in self-regulated learning strategies. Analyses of these differences brought out that “girls reported significantly more record keeping and monitoring, environmental structuring, and goalsetting and planning than did boys.” (Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons, 1990, p. 57) This demonstrated that girls greatly use self-regulated learning strategies despite the fact that they are lower than boys in verbal efficacy.

Dongyue carried out another interesting research in 2004 the findings of which demonstrate “that females are better at managing and controlling their emotions than their male counterparts.” (Bozinovic & Sindik, 2011, p.12) It can be inferred from these studies that there is a correlation between gender and language proficiency.

In terms of achievement, a study carried out on foreign language learners (50 males and 50 females) validated what Second Language Acquisition theorists claim; “female learners show possible superiority in their second language learning process.” (Zoghi & Kazemi & Kalani, 2013, p. 1124)

Table 2: Total Male and Female Mean and Standard Deviation

	Gender of Total	N	MEAN	SD
Total Male and Female	male	50	12.33	3.48
Scores	female	50	15.59	3.09

(Zoghi & Kazemi & Kalani, 2013, p. 1126)

The study was conducted in a language institute in Iran on young adults who were given the achievement test at the end of the second semester. As the table shows, “the total mean of all female students (M= 15.59) is higher than that of males’ (M=121.33)” (Zoghi & Kazemi & Kalani, 2013, p. 1126) indicating that female students outperformed male students.

3. Popular stereotypes

Men and women are portrayed differently as language users. Some of the popular stereotypes claim that men, as powerful speakers, have the status of being “norm-makers, language regulators, and language planners. (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2005, p. 550) while women “are often seen as garrulous, frivolous, and illiterate language users.” (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2005, p. 550) This kind of gender-stereotyping is also seen in textbooks where men are portrayed as dominating the conversations and women showing obedience to the ideas that men express. Freebody and Baker (1987) examined the English textbooks used in Australian schools and noticed that “girls were allowed to introduce topics but only boys expanded them...

‘Let us make a little play house with this’ says Jane.

‘Yes,’ says Peter. ‘It will be fun. There will be no danger.’

Then he says, ‘We will not make a little house, we will make a big one to play in. Then you and I, and the dog can get in it.’

‘Good’ says Jane.”

(Pauwels, 1998, p.22)

Stern (1976) conducted a research on language textbooks for foreign languages other than English such as in French, German, Italian, Latin, Russian and Spanish by analyzing the texts and visual images. At the end of her study, “she found that women were either largely invisible in texts or when they were present, gender-role stereotyping was accentuated.” (Pauwels, 1998,

p.23) To illustrate, female characters were depicted generally as mothers, wives and/or housewives while men were portrayed as breadwinners and providers of the family. These examples indicate that language teaching materials depict a subtle presentation of gender from a masculine-generic perspective which makes females subtly invisible and secondary. Since such linguistic stereotyping is discriminatory and damaging to women, which is a problem to be addressed.

Women's Movement of the 1970s challenged the idea that women are norm-makers by becoming norm-breakers. Bodine's paper published in 1975 "showed that sex-indefinite *he* gained its dominant status as generic pronoun as a result of male regulation." (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2005, p. 551) The Department of Linguistics at Harvard University also recognizes the use of *man* and generic *he* as sexist affecting perceptions on gender and sex in language.

The use of the third person singular pronoun *he* is considered as sexist against which women proposed the use of non-sexist language proving that women are able to break the norm. They developed their own norms and implemented them across communities in the Western world during the 1970s' and 1980s' non-sexist language campaigns. These reforms were the so called *The Feminist Linguistic Activism* which aimed at achieving social change by following a sociolinguistic approach. By identifying the problematic issues and concerns, proposals for change were developed and implemented at the end of which language planning exercises were evaluated. These feminist attempts aimed at achieving linguistic equality among the sexes that was also called *gender-neutralization* or *gender-specification*. An illustration of this might be "the elimination in English of female occupational nouns with suffixes such as *-ess*, *-ette*, *-trix* (e.g. *actress*, *usherette*, *aviatrix*)". (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2005, p. 556) Women's visibility in all professions using feminine occupational forms cleared the way for an effective social change. One word that stood at the center of these discussions was *chairman* which was proposed to be replaced by words such as *president*, *chair* or *chairperson*. Replacing the generic pronoun *he* by pronouns such as singular *they*, or by generic *she*, *he*, or *one* is another example of this. (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2005, p. 559)

4. Sexism (in educational materials and language practices)

To some, English is a "sexist" language as we begin to read the literature. Examples they use to make this claim help make this a more obvious fact. For instance, the use of third-person

singular pronoun as *he* or *she* can be evaluated as putting a clear difference between how the sexes are described. In English, trying to find the right pronoun might create some problems in sounding natural. For instance, instead of saying “Everybody should pick up their pen.” which is argued to be grammatically incorrect, one might struggle by saying “Everybody should pick up his or her pen.” which is grammatically correct, nevertheless is sexist.

Another example might be the use of words *man* and *mankind* to describe the human race. The man / the male as the norm for human representation “reduces the woman/female to the status of the “subsumed”, the “invisible”, or the “marked” one: women are invisible in language.” (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2005, p. 553) Thus, the use of pronouns “he or she” or “they” should be preferred to eliminate sexism. Another striking feature is “the absence of words to denote women in a variety of roles, professions, and occupations” (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2005, p. 553) such as *policeman*, *postman*, and *businessman*. Moreover, “Women holding certain positions are sometimes described in terms of men, e.g., *female judge*, *madam chairman*, and *lady doctor*.” (Wardhaugh, 1992, p. 313) Some words in English might have an unpleasant, negative connotation having “no male equivalents, e.g., *effeminate*, *emasculated*, *divorcée*, and *hen-pecked*; and even certain objects of an unpleasant kind are referred to as being feminine: *black widow spider*, *Black Maria*, *iron maiden* *Venus fly trap*, and *Hurricane Betsy*.” (Wardhaugh, 1992, p. 313)

The studies conducted by Cooper (1984), Markovitz (1984), Ehrlich and King (1994) and Pauwels (1997b, 2000) together with many others began to see daylight concerning the adopting of non-sexist language use of English. Cooper’s corpus of 500,000 words taken from American newspapers and magazines showed that there has been a dramatic fall in the use of generic nouns, *man* and *he*. Ehrlich and King’s studies proved that there has been a marked increase in the non-sexist alternative to these pronouns. Pauwels’ survey carried out in 2,000 job advertisements in Australian newspapers demonstrated a very high use of non-sexist generic nouns and pronouns. It was concluded that “With the exception of *chairman* and *handyman*, all -*man* compounds occurred less than their gender-inclusive counterparts.” (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2005, p. 563) This has become clearer today with the more common uses of occupation vocabulary such as *flight attendant*, *business person*, and *salesperson*.

5. Classroom Application

Bearing in mind the results of studies and surveys that are conducted, it seems necessary to raise learner awareness of the types of strategies they can use in foreign language learning. Educators should be aware of the gender effects on language learning. They need to be more familiar with the different strategies preferred by different genders. To do so, it would be a wise choice to give out a questionnaire to learners at beginning of the semester/course. Through analyzing the preferred strategies, necessary changes and adaptations can be done in curriculum and lesson planning to better meet learner expectations and needs.

In teaching English, I firmly believe that non-sexist practices should be applied mainly to teaching writing, speaking, and vocabulary. In teaching vocabulary, teaching the modified terms would help learners better identify and express themselves in English. Instead of using words such as “actor-actress, chairman-chairwoman, policeman-policewomen” it would be a better idea to teach “actor, police officer or chairperson” to sound non-sexist. In teaching writing, awareness should be raised on the non-sexist use of pronouns such as *he* or *she* and the singular use of *they* when expressing opinions or producing supporting details in essay writing. In teaching speaking, educators should help learners use and produce non-sexist connotations and references when giving opinions or arguing their viewpoints during a debate, discussion, presentation or a conversation.

Furthermore, the educational materials that are selected should be free of gender bias to avoid discrimination and sexist language and referencing. The effects of sexism; mainly linguistic sexism; might be detrimental in the early stages of foreign language learning affecting younger learners more than the adults. The visual images and texts used in textbooks should not be sex-stereotyped and should portray girls and boys equally in the society. Instead of portraying male characters as verbally more dominant and engaged in a more diverse range of activities than girls, texts and images should depict both sexes impartially and equivalently.

In English language education, the application of language sexism should be highlighted and avoided to tackle with the problems that might occur over the course of learning. Preventing the spread of sexism helps the educators and language users express their identity and opinions more clearly and free of gender bias.

6. Conclusion

To make language learning more influential, it is essential to be aware of gender differences. Research proves that there are particularities among male and female users of language and these are observed in the strategies used when learning a foreign language. The results of studies demonstrate that female learners use all types of strategies more frequently than male learners do. In addition, women outperform men in language learning when test results are analyzed.

Some popular stereotypes have shown that men tend to control the discussions while women remain on the receiving end of the conversation who support and agree with what men usually say. Moreover, it is observed that women use a more sensitive and descriptive language than men affecting the way they learn a language. In many textbooks, it is seen that women are usually portrayed as invisible and secondary putting the male gender at the forefront of gender presentation. Such masculine-generic perspective is discriminatory, so non-sexist approaches should be used in language teaching.

To avoid sexism, textbooks should, for example, focus on using the third person singular pronouns *he* or *she* to express ideas in general. The use of singular *they* would also be an alternative for the purpose of eliminating sexist language. Non-sexist practices can be best applied to teaching writing, speaking and vocabulary by selecting educational materials that are free of gender bias. By helping learners express their identity and opinions more clearly and freely, the escalation of this problem can be prevented.

To make English language learning more meaningful and effective, language teachers should identify and recognize gender differences and plan lessons accordingly to better meet learner needs and expectations. Educators need to plan courses and curricula bearing in mind the various strategies men and women choose. The strategies they use directly affect how they perceive and acquire language helping them achieve success. When learners become autonomous, they manage to choose the ones that best work for them, thus, success can truly be attained.

7. Scope of Future Research & Future Limitations

It would be beneficial to do further research on the effectiveness of the use of different strategies. Test results or course outcomes for English language classes might be analyzed to

reveal how strategies males and females use affect the way they learn a foreign language. Furthermore, contemporary language teaching textbooks and materials should be studied to see how non-sexist approaches are currently presented and how men and women are portrayed in latest teaching practices.

These studies might have some limitations. Firstly, the participants would be limited to a specific culture. Since some cultures are more male-dominated than others, it would not give us an accurate presentation of how learners and educators perceive sexism and how they apply non-sexist practices. Secondly, the age and social background of the learners should be analyzed differently because learners at specific age groups might use different strategies at various stages of language learning. For further research, these studies are needed to be done in different settings and contexts. Some research with younger learners, teenagers, adolescents and adults can be helpful to explore the best observations, reach positive results, and find the best answers to the above research questions.

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