

Gender Differences in Freshmen's English Autonomous Learning Activities

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Abstract: The present study attempts to identify whether there is significant gender differences in freshmen's English autonomous learning activities. A 5-point Likert questionnaire consisting of 30 items is administered to 832 non-English major freshmen. All the data collected are analyzed by SPSS 22.0. It is found that there does exist significant differences in 5 specific activities.

1. Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed enormous studies on students' autonomous learning. Holec (1981: 3) defines autonomy as the ability to control and regulate one's own learning, including identifying learning objectives, learning contents, learning strategies, and assessing the outcome of acquisition. Nowadays it has become a consensus among researchers that it is learners rather than teachers who should be responsible for their learning. While foreign languages are commonly considered "feminine" subjects, with research studies frequently reporting higher levels of motivation and effort for females (Ryan, in Dornyei and Ushioda, 2009: 135), it is assumed that gender plays a role in freshmen's English autonomous learning activities. Since there have not been sufficient studies directly focusing on the role of gender in previous literature, the present research aims to conduct a survey to reveal whether there is significant gender differences in English autonomous learning activities both inside and outside the classroom.

2. The study

The specific research questions of the present study are (1) if there is any gender difference in terms of English autonomous learning activities both inside and outside of the classroom and (2) what are the possible factors that give rise to this gender difference.

2.1 Variables

The independent variable is gender in the present study. The dependent variables consist of students' perception of the importance of English, enjoyment of learning English and English autonomous learning activities.

2.2 Instrument

The data collection instrument in this study is an online questionnaire consisting of two parts. While the first part solicits the demographic and attitudinal information, the second part consists of 24 items, covering in-class and out-of-class English autonomous learning activities. All the items are provided with 5-point Likert scale options, "never", "seldom", "sometimes", "often" and "always", respectively. These items were adapted from Figura & Jarvis's (2007) questionnaire. The original version of Figura & Jarvis (2007) is in English, which was translated into Chinese and then checked by two experienced English teachers. Based on their feedback, the wording of several items was modified.

2.3 Participants

The present study employed a convenience sampling. 832 freshmen of non-English majors were the participants who were asked to complete an online questionnaire under explicit guidance. Among the 832 participants, 39 participants' data were considered not appropriate for various reasons and were eliminated manually. Among the remaining participants, there are 403 male and 390 female students coming from 30 majors other than English.

2.4 Data collection and data analysis

Data collection took place between late November and early December, 2016. Participants were organized by their English teachers, who distributed the questionnaire online to the classes they teach and clarified that the purpose of the survey was for research only and further ensured students that all the data collected would have nothing to do with their final examination results. Students were asked to complete the questionnaire online whenever they were available. Should there be any confusion, they were encouraged to ask the researcher for clarification.

Those completed questionnaires were downloaded by the researcher and the raw data were sorted out and coded using Microsoft Excel. Finally, the data file was processed by SPSS 22. The Cronbach Alpha internal consistency reliability coefficient for the questionnaire is 0.92. As for quantitative methods used in this study, the frequencies of the male and female participants' responses were computed first. Then a series of chi-square analysis were conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between male and female freshmen.

3. Results

(1) Gender differences in terms of all the English autonomous learning activities

Not surprisingly, the statistics of chi-square analysis revealed that there did exist some significant differences between male and female freshmen in terms of five specific autonomous learning activities. The details of differences are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of Responses to 5 Autonomous Learning Activities

	Making suggestion to the teacher		Reading books or magazines in English		Watching English TV programs		Talking to foreigners in English		Writing letters or emails in English	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
never	71	70	38	29	31	12	84	52	206	170
seldom	183	215	125	162	88	109	163	191	109	144
sometimes	112	91	173	146	154	140	108	114	62	63
often	25	9	44	38	76	92	24	20	16	10
always	12	5	23	15	54	37	24	13	10	3
χ^2	14.955		10.177		15.791		13.331		13.241	
d.f.	4		4		4		4		4	
p	0.005		0.038		0.003		0.010		0.010	

Note: M stands for male while F female.

Table 1 shows the frequency for each response to five autonomous learning activities. It was calculated that 37.0% of the male freshmen reported that they made suggestions to the teacher whereas only 26.9% of the female did the same. A chi-square analysis yielded the following results: d.f.: 4; chi-square = 14.955, $p = 0.005 < 0.05$. According to these statistics, the difference between the male and female freshmen in terms of making suggestions to the teacher was highly significant ($p < 0.05$).

As for the frequency for each response to reading books or magazines in English, 42.9% of the male freshmen reported that they sometimes read books or magazines in English, 10.9% of them often did this, and only 5.7% of them always read books or magazines in English. In contrast, 37.4% of the female reported that they sometimes did this, 9.7% often did this and only 3.8% of them always read books or magazines in English. The statistics of a chi-square analysis (d.f.: 4; chi-square = 10.177; $p = 0.038 < 0.05$) also revealed that the difference between male and female freshmen in terms of this aspect was significant ($p < 0.05$).

For the frequency of watching English TV programs, the percentages of male freshmen who

reported sometimes, often or always watched English TV programs are 38.2%, 18.9%, and 13.4%, respectively. For the female freshmen, the percentages are 35.9%, 23.6% and 9.5%, respectively. A chi-square analysis showed the following results: d.f.: 4, chi-square = 15.791, $p = 0.003 < 0.05$. Therefore, it is inferred that there was also a significant difference between male and female freshmen in terms of watching TV programs ($p < 0.05$).

As far as talking to foreigners is concerned, it was calculated that 26.8% of male freshmen responded that they sometimes did so, 6.0% of them often talked to foreigners in English and another 6.0% always did so. For the female freshmen, the percentages of sometimes, often and always talking to foreigners in English amounted to 29.2%, 5.1% and 3.3%, respectively. The statistics of a chi-square analysis (d.f.: 4, chi-square = 13.331, $p = 0.010 < 0.05$) revealed that there existed a significant difference between male and female freshmen in this aspect.

In contrast to the above items, writing letters or emails to friends in English is one of the least conducted autonomous activities among freshmen. Whereas 51.1% and 27.0% of male respondents reported respectively that they never or seldom wrote letters or emails to friends in English, the figures were 43.6% and 36.9% respectively for the female respondents. It might indicate that this activity was not conducted by most of the freshmen as a whole. The statistics of another chi-square analysis (d.f.: 4, chi-square = 13.241, $p = 0.010 < 0.05$) revealed that there still existed a significant difference between the male and female respondents in this aspect.

(2) Differences in perception of the importance of English between male and female freshmen

Table 2. Perception of Importance of English

	Immensely important	Very important	Kind of important	Not important	Not at all
Male	151	192	53	3	4
Female	166	198	25	1	0

A chi-square analysis yielded the following results: d.f.: 4; chi-square = 15.644; $p = 0.004 < 0.05$. According to these statistics, the difference between male and female freshmen in terms of their perception of importance of English was highly significant. It can be inferred that the female freshmen attached more importance to English ($p < 0.05$).

(3) Difference between male and female freshmen in terms of the English scores in College Entrance Examination

An independent-sample t-test was used to compare male and female freshmen’s English scores in College Entrance Examination. The test showed a significant difference ($t = -2.315$, $df = 791$, $p = 0.021 < 0.05$) between the two genders in Table 3. Therefore, it is inferred that female freshmen outperformed their male counterparts in terms of the English scores.

Table 3. Independent-samples t-test for Male and Female English Scores

	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Male	403	131.74	8.584		
Female	390	133.23	9.458	-2.315	0.021

4. Discussion

The results presented above locate some significant differences in making suggestions to the teacher about language learning activities in class, reading books or magazines in English, and talking to foreigners in English, watching English TV programs and writing letters or emails in English.

The easily located difference may give rise to the inference that male freshmen were more active and bold in making suggestions to the teacher. Male freshmen seem to be more responsible for language learning. Comparatively speaking, they were more prepared to read books or magazines in English. These findings are not consistent with general belief that female are more active in language learning. It seems that the proficiency advantage of female freshmen did not actually motivate them to an advantageous extent in terms of the autonomous learning activities, although they believe English is important. This finding is also inconsistent with Varol and Yilmaz’s (2010: 242) study, in which they concluded that it was the female students who were more active and

responsible both inside and outside the class. Therefore, findings of the present study may serve to correct the stereotyped opinions on male learners.

5. Conclusion

The present study explored some significant gender differences in freshmen's English autonomous learning activities and found male freshmen were more active. One of the limitations of the present study is that all the data collected were self-reported data, which may lead to doubt whether this retrospective reporting reflects reality^[4]. Another limitation lies in the lack of triangulation of supportive data. For instance, should there be interviews with teachers and classroom observations, the results would become more robust and persuasive.

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