



# Gender Differences in English Learning of Chinese Students

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**Abstract.** This article aims to analyze the gender differences in English learning of Chinese students based on four perspectives: listening, reading, writing, speaking. By investigating gender differences in different sections and their root causes, it aims to improve English education qualities and learning strategies in China. This article illustrates that there is significant gender difference between males and females with regards to listening section and women outperformed their men counterparts. With regards to reading, the same pattern can be found between males and females. However, men are at superior positions than women when it comes to writing due to their clear logic and structure. As for speaking, the abilities of female students and male students were poor compared to listening, reading and writing. This phenomenon is influenced by Chinese English teaching pattern that focus on interpreting grammar and is likely to ignore oral English.

**Keywords:** Gender difference · English teaching · Chinese English learners · Teaching method

## 1 Introduction

The increasingly frequent international exchanges and cooperation makes English becomes a significant and global language with approximately 400 million native speakers [1]. Resulting from the wide application and its popularity, English learning becomes a hot topic throughout the world. Consequently, there has been a great concern on the factors that potentially influence English learning. It has been argued that family background determines quantity and quality of language exposure [2]. In addition, personality characteristic is also correlated to English learning process [3]. Among these studies, gender difference is recognized as a crucial factor in order to illustrate how listening, reading, writing and speaking affect English abilities. Concerning listening section, it can be divided into two main categories based on the content and purposes: listening for general thoughts and listening for detailed information. Namaziandost, Sabzevari and Hashemifardnia's stated that gender is not a noticeable variable in English listening ability because of similar test scores of females and males English learners in Iran. It is the individual difference that widens the gap of academic performance compared with gender [4]. With regards to reading section, it is classified into three categories: capturing main idea, reading for basic comprehension and vocabulary knowledge [5]. Reading

requires individuals to understand the meanings of words and phrases and even make inferences based on the articles and dialogues. Approximately 50% studies suggest that female superiority exists which is twice more than that of supporting male advantage. Generally speaking, female students performs better than male students in reading ability [6]. Similarly, 1,067 responses from PTESOL test which is a authoritative English proficiency test developed by the Language Center of Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia noted that women enabled to make better inferences in context about the vocabularies and comprehend information more accurate. However, it is less difficult for men to capture the main point [4]. After conducting a study among 440 grade-10 students (220 male subjects and 220 female subjects) from urban and rural schools, Javed, Wu and Nazli found that the average writing test scores were similar between males and females. As a result, they concluded that gender difference is not likely to influence writing performances. However, students from urban schools were at an advantage compared to their rural peers and this result revealed position is an influential factor that plays a pivotal role in writing skills [7]. Statistics also showed that the writing abilities of women and men are similar and the mean of males are only 0.4 ahead of women's. Specifically, the performances of men are more outstanding in word completion, sentence making, grammar and handwriting, while comprehension was in favor of women [6]. A study suggested that gender was a negligible factor that tend to have slight impact on students' speaking performances which opposed the stereotype that women is more talented in English speaking by investigating TOEFL examination scores of 32 international students [8]. But these international students practiced a lot in accordance to test questions which potentially have the possibility that these scores were not able to reveal their true speaking abilities.

The above discussion is based on the international contexts. When it comes to China, there is a large gap between Chinese grammar systems, pronunciation patterns and culture to English-speaking countries. Thus, it is not clear that whether the conclusions that were reached in an international context can also explain and apply to English learning of Chinese students. Since there is lack of a uniform viewpoint of whether gender difference is a significant factor related to English learning, it is worth to be analyzed. Lin and Wu proposed that there was no huge disparity in English academic performances between females and male. In terms of listening comprehension, females outperformed their male counterparts dramatically with higher mean scores [6]. However, such conclusion is inconsistent with the findings of Gao and Jiang that the mean score of females listening was only slightly higher than the figure for male subjects. With regards to reading section, it is also not a feminine domain. The average scores of males and females were similar [9]. Regarding writing skills, Liu argued that female students were in a superior position than male based on CET4 (College English Test Band-4) results of non-English major students from Neijiang Normal University [10]. This was not verified by the experiments of 2011 among students from Yantai that concluded the writing levels are equal [9]. Concerning verbal ability, the overall performance of Chinese students is lower than other three sections due to the fact that speaking is not included in the English test systems in China. Therefore, it is common that Chinese students ignore the importance of oral English and spend less time on its practice. However, gender is a

influential factor that make difference on the test scores of oral English. The figure for female students are much higher than male students [11].

Based on the above discussion, people have realized the impact of gender differences in English learning. But the language environment and educational system differed from western countries. In addition, there is no systematic understanding of the influence of gender differences. Therefore, This article will analyze the gender difference in English proficiency in four aspects: listening, reading, writing and speaking.

### 1.1 Gender Differences in Listening Teaching

In China, listening section is usually placed in the first part of a English test. In primary school, it contains spelling of the vocabularies, and multiple choices questions. In addition, the listening materials are simple and easy to understand with low speed. This is because the English proficiency of elementary school students are relatively low and in some provinces children began to learn English in the third grade. The difficulty of listening section increased with grade accompanying with longer and more complicated dialogues speaking in a faster speed. Listening examines students' abilities of listening comprehension including judging the context of conversations, and capturing detailed information. The CET4 test scores of 106 students from Yantai, Shandong province indicated there was no significant gender difference in English listening [9]. The score of listening is a indicator of the abilities of comprehension, inference, and understanding detailed information. Furthermore, the average scores of males and females are close, with 13.485 and 14.300 respectively. It is interesting to find that listening accounted for 15% of variation of total scores of male students which was higher than the figure for females. While the scores of females were more stable and uniform. Including students from different majors, this conclusion is more supportive compared to data collected from a simple major. However, there are limitations that needs to be improved. Firstly, the number of females and males are not equal, the figure for males are 26 more than their female peers which tend to influence the accuracy of the outcomes. Secondly, the number of samples are insufficient and only choose students from one city as research subjects in China. Thus, the results potentially show particularity and fail to explain the majority circumstances in China. However, the findings of Tu and Cai revealed opposite result, concluding that women performed better with regards to English listening [12]. The samples were 9225 non-English major university students and it avoided the limitation of small sample size. The biggest difference in scores was the listening section which women were 10 points more than men. And listening took responsible for 73% variation of total scores, higher than male counterparts. This conclusion is also contradicted to the previous findings that listening is a more influential factor to males' total scores. In addition, the test scores of males were more even and the variation was more significant of the females' scores.

### 1.2 Gender Differences in Reading Teaching

There are various types of questions in English reading tests in China, consisting of choosing the best title, true of false and multiple choices. Three passages were presented in the test and the first one requires students to skim while the other two concentrating

on testing detailed information. Therefore, reading tests examine students' comprehensive abilities including the comprehension ability, analyzing ability and vocabularies. According to Zhao et al., no gender differences were discovered in their research because the mean score of females was only one point higher than males [9]. Besides, the distribution of males' scores were more even compared to females' scores. However, the percentage of reading was nearly three quarters in the variation of the total scores. It ranked the first which illustrated that reading is the section that had greatest impact on males. While compared to listening ability, reading ability are similar between men and women. Du and Cai argued that females performed better concerning reading test with higher average scores [12]. The proportion of listening section and reading section was the same, representing 35% of the total scores. However, what contradicted to the previous finding was that the scores of females were more stable which showed that the overall performances of women were better with higher means. In addition, males and females were more adept in listening part compared to reading. Furthermore, the gap of male is more dramatic, with 78.03 and 123.94 respectively. The reasons why women were better readers were that their vocabularies were more abundant as well as their grammar. In addition, self-concepts were also recognized as a factor that should be taken into consideration. Analyzing among 348 university students, Liang concluded that women owned stronger self-concepts of reading abilities compared to males [13]. Similar results were concluded from the experiments among 156 university students in Xuzhou Normal University. Reading efficacy, achievement value and social aspects for reading were correlated to reading performances. Women were more motivated with higher self-concepts and passion. Some subjects were motivated by external factor such as studying abroad and examination which lacks long-lasting effects. From the social perspective, women showed greater preference on communication and taking others' advice. Consequently, the passion of discussion about the content of reading materials was stronger. The confidence and positive psychological suggestion assisted women to have better reading performance. In addition, personalities play a vital role in widening the gap between men and women. Precisely, women tend to be more careful and patient which is easier for them to immerse in the articles. Besides, they were more likely to capture detailed information which consisted of a large percentage in the reading test. It was argued that the reading strategies were not appropriate chosen which lead to poor reading performance and decrease the efficiency. However, research had shown that gender difference hardly exists with regards to reading strategies [15]. Although the frequency of women applied reading strategies is higher, especially self-initiation, monitoring and evaluating, making inferences and prediction, the overall use is similar.

### 1.3 Gender Differences in Writing Teaching

Writing section reveals the English proficiency of students' vocabulary, grammar level and logical ability. In China, it offers students a general topic and specifies the genre including letters and reports. In addition, students should organize the structure of their articles and write it in a given interval of time. The grading rubric includes handwriting, grammar, fluency and the relevance to the topic. Zhao et al. concluded that gender is not correlated to the writing scores [9]. Due to the fact that the difference of mean scores between men and women was slight, the former subjects fell behind only one point.

Besides, the variation of women's writing grades was smaller compared to men's scores. The similarity was that writing had slight effect on both women and men's total scores and their overall performances were better than listening and reading. However, the scores were influenced by the examiners' standards which are subjective. Thus, it is necessary to include at least two teachers to grade the tests and calculate the average scores which increase the accuracy and reliability of the data. If the scores that were given by two different teachers had huge distinction, then another teacher should also be involved in the process of grading. Another research indicated that women own slight advantage in the writing section compared to their male peers [12]. There were several reasons that contributed to this performance difference. Firstly, the richness of vocabularies and mastery of grammar knowledge were two essential factors that assist women to outperform men. Secondly, the structure of females' passages was more organized and reasonable resulting from their patient and strict characteristics. Thirdly, the language expression abilities of females are superior compared to males. To be more specific, they are more skilled in quoting poetry, using rhetoric device to polish their articles and makes them more vivid and delicate. Finally, handwriting is a cause that always being ignored. There is no doubt that women write carefully and their handwriting is cleaner and neater. As a consequence, the first impression is wonderful and the examiner potentially consider the author a brilliant student and give high ratings. However, the statistics proved that men owned more stable performance which was not in accordance with the previous findings. And it stated that there was strong correlation between listening and writing because these two components both examined the comprehension ability in a specific context. Furthermore, women and men were talented in this section as well. This is because Chinese students tend to recite and memorize templates and phrases from reference books and apply in their answers. Consequently, students with poor writing skills enabled to gain high scores which exceeded their true abilities. This phenomenon is a potential factor that negatively affect the credibility of the experiment. Liang and Fan noted that men were more willing to manage more complex and creative work while maintaining a high level, while women were more afraid of failure and paid less attention on pursuing individual achievement [16]. With regards to writing performance, women tried to recall the words they forgot instead of replacing with other words and the application of vocabularies were less flexible compared to men.

#### **1.4 Gender Differences in Speaking Teaching**

Speaking is not a common component of English test in China. However, the significance should not be ignored due to the fact that it is useful in the daily communication while going abroad. Xiao and Xiang argued that the mean scores of females were dramatically higher than males after conducting an experiment among 12110 individuals who took the PETS test [17]. The PETS test is divided into four levels based on the difficulties. The most noticeable disparity lied in level one and the subjects were under mainly under 20. This is because it tested students' expression abilities while describing a given image. And girls usually had better memory and can explain in a clearer and more detailed pattern which assisted them to gain higher scores. With the level increases, the difference between men and women narrowed, but oral English is still a female domain section. To be more specific, The thinking pattern of males were more logical and general. As a

result, their strengths revealed in a higher level of oral test which explained the reason why the gap of mean scores became smaller. It is consistent with the finding of Gao and Jiang which concluded that females were better English speakers. Based on strict and uniform scoring standards and considering impact of content and test difficulty, the result is credible which can inspire English teaching pattern in China. By analyzing the scores of 160 non-English major speakers from two terms, it was found that motivation plays a crucial role in determining the performance of oral English. 81% of women placed speaking in the first place compared to reading, writing and translating which is remarkably higher than men [11]. Most of individuals were unsatisfied with their oral English. As for the reason, students were afraid of making mistakes and thus avoid answering questions in class actively. Furthermore, English class in China is test-oriented which means that teachers spend large proportion of time on interpreting the grammar with the aims of increasing the grades of students. Finally, lacks English environment is also to be blamed for the poor oral performance. There were few opportunities for Chinese students to communicate in English in their daily lives. In addition, women were humbler and did not own a clear viewpoint of their oral English level. They thought that they were unable to express the key point which opposed to the result. And it is interesting to find that the content and question type also influence the result. The first test focus on examining the pronunciation and simple communication. Consequently, depending on clear pronunciation and great fluency, the mean score of females were higher. With regards to the second test, the content became more complicated. However, the gender gap of scores became smaller. As a result, men were more skilled in difficult compared to simple one. It is more supportive and subjective to research the oral ability of students in two terms. Regarding to two terms, the distribution of oral scores of women was more even than their men counterparts. However, the sample space was not large enough, which didn't prove the universality of this phenomenon.

## 2 Conclusions

Due to the wide application of English in the international communities, English learning has become a mainstream around the globe, especially in China. As a consequence, It is investigated in the global text that the factors including family backgrounds and personality traits are likely to influence English learning outcomes. It has been argued that gender is a vital factor that potentially determines the English learning process and outcomes. However, China differs from other foreign countries due to its special national conditions, cultural backgrounds and unique language systems. Consequently, it is not appropriate to utilize the results that concluded in an international context to explain the situation in China. Furthermore, there is no unified viewpoint that illustrates the gender differences in China. This article studies the gender differences in English learning in China based on four perspectives: listening, reading, writing and speaking. The most dramatic differences of mean scores can be found in listening section. Women performed better than their men counterparts with higher mean scores. However, the distribution of females' listening scores were less even compared to males' distribution. In addition, listening plays a crucial role in determining the total scores of all examiners. To be specific, women's total scores were affected by listening more. With regards to reading,

women were more talented than men resulting from several reasons. First of all, it is common that personality is correlated to reading performances. It is common that females read more carefully and it seems easier for them to capture the detailed information in the passages. Secondly, the abundant vocabularies and grammars assist women to perform better than males. Concerning writing, the overall performances of men were more significant than women. This is because men had stronger logical thinking abilities which support them to have a clearer structure while writing articles. In addition, males were not afraid of making mistakes which results in using more difficult vocabularies while females trying to use simpler expression instead of replacing them. As a result, men could make full use of their advantages in harder writing tests. However, women were in a superior position in the CET4 test. This is because there are large amounts of reference books which aimed to increase individuals' scores. And women were likely to recite sample articles with clear logic and structure. There is no doubt that this test is not able to reveal the true writing abilities to some extent and the conclusion is not supportive. In terms of oral English, Chinese students owned the lowest scores compared to other three sections. Due to the fact that it is not a component of the English test system in China, students were unwilling to practice it. In addition, the language environment is not suitable since mandarin is the official language in China. But gender differences still existed in speaking. The mean scores of females' speaking is higher than males because of pronunciation and fluency. But with the difficulty increase, the gap narrowed and the figures for men even overtook women's average scores. Some limitations of the current study must also be noted for future research. The study was not based on the same test which may influence the results. In addition, the age group was not the same and there is no doubt that teenagers have better learning abilities than children. Future research is encouraged to the performances of one specific age group based on the same test.

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