



# A Study on Gender Differences in Chinese Students' English Learning

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**ABSTRACT.** As the most widely spoken language in the world, English has become an important tool for international communication. English learning is a hot topic in whole society. However, there is still a lack of systematic understanding that how gender differences influence Chinese students' English learning. Therefore, this article reviews the previous research on gender differences and language, then points out the influence of gender differences on Chinese students' English learning from two aspects: internal causes and external causes. Ultimately, this paper provides several appropriate teaching strategies for English learning, suggesting that non-intelligence factors of the learners should be analyzed in English teaching and some countermeasures need to be put forward to reduce the differences between men and women in English learning; and teachers should also discover the common psychological characteristics of men and women and then conduct purposeful and structured teaching.

**Keywords:** language, gender differences, Sociolinguistics, English Learning.

## 1 Introduction

On the global level, international communication is becoming more and more frequent, and as the most widely spoken language in the world, English has become an important tool for international communication. Many factors influence the process of learning English, for example, region, age, gender and culture. Among all those factors, gender differences are a kind of individual factor that are prevalent and of continuing concern in the process of foreign language learning.

Gender Difference is a term used to refer to the variety of differences observed between men's and women's linguistic behavior [1]. Gender differences have been used as a linguistic variable in English language studies for a very long time. Studies of gender differences in the English language and other languages have had a period of slow development as one of the major disciplines in sociolinguistics. Throughout the 20th century, one of the most important topics in sociolinguistics has been the interaction between language and gender. After that, there has been an explosion of relevant research being done in many different areas. Without a doubt, research and studies in this area will help men and women better understand one another, laying the groundwork for developing harmonious interpersonal interactions.

In the 1920s, the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen first proposed the influence of gender on language learning and use in his book "Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin" [2]. Since the 1930s, the relationship between language learning and gender differences has received much attention from psychology, anthropology, linguistics and sociology. After the 1960s, the emergence of sociolinguistics has provided new tools for the teaching and research of linguistics, to enable gender differences in language teaching and learning research from multiple perspectives to identify, analyze and solve problems.

Robin Lakoff carried out a study of gender differences in American English in the early 1970s. Lakoff put forward a series of hypotheses concerning the linguistic behavior of females in American society [3]. These hypotheses suggest that there exists women register in the language that takes on the following characteristics: Women use more "fancy" color terms, for instance, "mauve" and "beige", less powerful curse words, more intensifiers, for example, "terrible" and "awful" more tag questions, more statement questions like "Dinner will be ready at seven o'clock?" with a rising intonation at the end. Linguistic behavior of women is more indirect and therefore more polite than men. As Lakoff correctly suggests, it is not the language itself but women's place in society that makes people linguistically behave in that way. The linguistic differences between men and women are culturally and socially governed.

George Lakoff, a representative of the cognitive linguistics school, conducted an in-depth study of gender differences in language through the theoretical model of "women's language" and "women's status", which has caused great repercussions in the international community [4].

American linguist Ellis Rod in his book "The Study of Second Language Acquisition", explicitly mentioned the influence of individual differences of language learners on foreign language learning [5].

Matthew L. Newman argues that language is an inherent social phenomenon that enables people to understand how men and women deal with their social world. In the field of social science, a growing body of research shows that men are more likely than women to use language to convey information and women are more likely to use verbal interactions to achieve social goals, and verbal communication is an end in itself [6].

Through the above research, we can see that on a global level, the impact of gender differences on English learning needs more deep studies. Among them, English teaching in China started late but has developed rapidly. The number of English learners in China is gradually increasing and Chinese English learners have been one of the largest groups of English learners in the world. Besides, in China, the customs, conventions, cultures and teaching styles are unique and different from other countries. Due to the special national condition in China, whether the above views on English learning are suitable for Chinese people remains to be discussed. In this field, China has the following research results:

Gu Lihong argues that gender differences not only reflect the discourse differences between men and women, but also reflect their different lifestyles and attitudes [7].

Dong Jinyu argues that the gender difference is the most major distinction between humans, hence persons of various genders will use language differently depending on

their gender traits in terms of physiology or psychology. We can draw conclusions about the significance of gender variations in language by examining and researching the connotation of these differences in language and their social origins. [8].

Zhang Xuning argues that many of the behavioral differences between men and women are based on innate biological differences in brain function and can not be considered solely from a cultural and social perspective. With the wide application of brain imaging technology, many discoveries have been made in the study of sex-related differences in brain structure and function. In language learning, the influence of gender differences on the development of language competence is also a concern [9].

Jiang Mengfei argues that during the period of English study, the gender difference is very obvious. From the perspective of learning motivation, there are obvious differences between boys and girls in intrinsic learning interest, learning responsibility and other motivation, girls, on the other hand, tend to be more long-term oriented [10].

Though many scholars in the academic field have realized the importance of gender differences in English learning in China, they failed to conduct a systemic illustration of how gender difference influences Chinese people to learn English. For this reason, the current article aims to offer a systematic arrangement to the previous research and then form a clear understanding of this topic. This article mainly analyzes the topic from the following aspects: gender differences in English learning for Chinese students, internal and external causes of gender differences and the effective strategies and has also conducted relevant studies, they have not yet obtained systematic theories and coping strategies about gender differences. Through the above discussion, we can see that the impact of gender differences on English learning in the world has been reflected in the process of English learning. Due to historical factors, English teaching in China started late but has developed rapidly. China's national conditions are also relatively special. Based on the above research, this paper will make a further study on gender differences in Chinese students' English learning and relevant strategies.

## **2 Gender Differences in English Learning for Chinese Students**

Gender differences in psychological research consistently show that women are better at language than men in many aspects: First, women are good at speaking and expressing themselves. Second, most women are better than men at English. Last but not least, women tend to have more positive attitudes towards English learning. It was argued that there are many differences between men and women in the learning style of English—women tend to learn English in a mechanical way [11].

Women have much greater stamina than men. When reciting English words, women can recite patiently, while men are more active, but cannot recite carefully for a long time. There are significantly more women than men in the university's foreign languages department. In sociolinguistics, there are differences between men and women in the way of dialogue and language norms. Specifically, it was argued that

women pay more attention to the use of elegant and subtle language, but also pay more attention to language norms [12]. Women like to use polite language. However, men also have some advantages in learning English. For example, they are good at understanding, and reading, with a wide visual space. On the whole, women have more advantages in learning English. These gender differences in English learning are caused by the following reasons.

### **3 Causes of Gender Differences in English Learning**

#### **3.1 Internal Causes**

In English learning, the causes of gender differences include internal and external aspects. The internal cause is the key to the development of things. It mainly includes cognitive differences, self-consciousness differences and interest differences.

##### **Cognition Difference.**

According to biological differences in brain function, women do not speak until a month earlier in infancy than men. At Preschool, women have a larger vocabulary than men. Women began to use sentences flexibly, using longer and more complex sentences earlier than men. In pronunciation, women reach the age of full articulation relatively early. In primary school, a woman's pronunciation is similar to that of a man in second grade. In daily life, when women tell this story, their pronunciation and expression are better than men's. Scientific studies have found that the language centers in women's brains are much larger than those in men. Men typically have a more developed right hemisphere brain, which allows them to perform spatial tasks such as reading maps or interpreting technical drawings. Women tend to have more developed left hemispheres, which may be why they learn to speak earlier than men. Therefore, they are usually better at using language.

More recent surveys, however, have concluded that these differences have never gone away and have been relatively stable for decades. Women outperformed men on most language tasks, although the difference was small. Gender differences in speech ability appear earlier than in other cognitive abilities. When women are 13 years old, their advantage in language will be further expanded. They are good not only at spelling but also at writing. Women develop their reading skills earlier and feel more comfortable learning English.

##### **Self-awareness Difference.**

In terms of self-awareness. The researcher's attitude to the influence of English learning is greater than that of other subjects. Attitude can affect the study of any subject, but the attitude to English learning is more important. Because language and emotion are closely related, and gender differences are related to people's attitudes toward English learning. Compared with males, females' attitudes to English learning are more active. C. Berstall, a survey of learning attitudes and records on the links between the two, found that "After a period of learning, successful learners will be con-

ducive to the establishment of learning English attitude [13]." This positive attitude will promote English learning, and then success. Otherwise, failure will lead to a negative learning attitude, a negative attitude will further lead to failure, and so on and so forth.". Therefore, the positive attitude of women so that they have also achieved good academic performance. Good grades will encourage students to keep up. Self-confidence is the emotional expression of self-awareness, which has the function of causing and maintaining behavior. It is the energy that inspires and encourages people to succeed with their abilities and efforts. Confident students are more likely to progress academically, develop their potential, and develop their personality.

According to several domestic and foreign research and school work practices, we can find that women are generally less confident than men. For example, women tend to underestimate their own abilities and are afraid to speak up or stand up for themselves. Reading quietly and solving problems on your own has become a learning habit for most women. But men's self-confidence allows them to have more chances of success.

### **Interest Difference.**

Many studies have shown that interest in learning English is positively correlated with English achievement. If you are not interested in learning English, you can't get good grades. Men have a wide range of interests, but those interests are often short-lived. Women's hobbies are narrower than men's. But once women are interested in something, they can keep it up for a long time. We all know that when we were studying in primary school, the teacher often asked us to sit up straight with our hands on our backs. For women, they prefer this quiet way of learning, while men are often naughty in class. Male thinking mode is extensive, flexible and creative, but it emphasizes logical thinking. So men usually like science, for example, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and philosophy.

Females' psychological sensitivity is very good, they are used to wonderful thinking. Women don't like to work in deductive reasoning. So women usually like English, literature, art, biology and so on. Women choose the foreign language department because of their interests, so a strong interest makes them learn English more actively than men, more stable, more lasting. They can get satisfaction and confidence in the process of learning English. They are hardly disturbed by external factors.

### **3.2 External Cause**

External factors also play a very significant part in the development of objects. Gender differences are also influenced by child discipline, schooling and social and cultural factors.

### **Family Education.**

In child discipline, women tend to have relationships, take responsibility for themselves and others, and place a strong emphasis on communication. They are trained as "Talkers". Females, on the other hand, become attached to objects from an early age.

They are "Doers". Women are three times as likely as men to turn to supervised adults for help, a study that looked at young children doing jigsaw puzzles has found. In the absence of an adult, women turn directly to men for help. The research shows that women are more likely to associate with people, while men are more likely to associate with objects. Men are usually expected to be men and women to be gentle and kind. Male parents often stress that they should achieve, compete and know how to control their emotions. However, women's parents demand that they understand communication skills and express their feelings. Males are encouraged to be decisive, aggressive and adventurous. The female behavior should be gentle and passive. There is a greater demand for men to achieve great success in their careers. English learning is closely related to communication and Oral English. In child discipline, women develop the habit of communication, for women's language learning has laid a good foundation.

### **School Education.**

Most of the knowledge comes from the school, so the education in the school has a great influence on the students' thinking. There are likely various influences that contribute to gender differences in the classroom. The basic knowledge of the English language is mainly phonetic symbols, vocabulary and grammar. For example, the study of phonetic symbols not only requires the teacher to explain and show to the students carefully but also requires the students to imitate and practice. Currently, the education model is not good for men. Women's pronunciation is clearer and their ability to imitate is better than men's. However, teachers often ignore this fact, so men and women are often required to learn the same things in the same way and at the same time. Therefore, it's hard for men to read well. Most teachers think that men like logical thinking and are good at science. On the contrary, women prefer liberal arts. For this reason, teachers pay great attention to teaching men mathematics, physics, chemistry and other subjects related to understanding and analysis, so it is easy to ignore the advantages of men in English learning. When men make mistakes in class, teachers often criticize them in a serious tone, but the criticism of women is more tactful. Men often come under more criticism. This different treatment can harm men's enthusiasm for learning. Gender difference has an obvious influence on English achievement. Men are impulsive and women are gentle, which is caused by different hormones in women and men. Reflected in English learning, more men are impulsive type, while most women are introspective type.

### **Social and Culture.**

From a sociocultural point of view, foreign authors of social psychology have done this survey, and the results show that most people think that men are suitable for engineering and 246 technicians, managers, judges, military personnel and so on. Women are suitable for teachers, journalists, translators, tour guides, secretaries, nurses and other jobs. Now, according to a survey on the internet, if a man gets a job as a teacher or a nurse, most people think it's not a good job for them, but a normal job. Because it's hard for a male to get a good development and earn a lot of money to support a

large family. On the contrary, being a teacher or nurse is a pretty good job for a woman. These jobs are considered suitable and stable for women. Especially as a graduate student, it's not hard to see that when we go to job fairs, we know that many jobs have gender limitations. For example, it is often pointed out that mechanical work requires men, while language work usually requires women. These results demonstrate that the traditional domain of male achievement is often unrelated to the domain of language. But girls are different. Their work is usually closely related to language. Long-standing social needs and personality traits increase gender differences. Because of the social preference for women to learn English and the high expectation of women's language ability, women have achieved great success in second language learning.

## **4 Effective English Teaching Strategies**

Because of the gender differences in English learning, appropriate teaching strategies should be put forward.

### **4.1 Attach Importance to Individualized Teaching**

Teachers should know more about students, and understanding and respecting the psychological differences between men and women is very important. Teachers should always share teaching ideas to be more careful in choosing presentation materials. How they treat men and women in the classroom may help reduce gender differences in English learning. One study found that women prefer cooperative, open and organized activities, while men prefer competition and individualism. In addition, these studies show that women rate their own learning experiences more highly than men. Teachers can apply these different preferences to their teaching methods by assigning co-operative assignments to girls and individual assignments to boys.

### **4.2 Pay attention to Students' Advantages and Disadvantages in English Learning**

Self-confidence is a very important non-intellectual factor in the development of psychology. Therefore, educators should attach great importance to improving students' confidence in the teaching process. It is a practical educational task to correct gender bias in school education, optimize the learning environment and appreciate and cultivate the confidence of women. The cultivation of women's subjective consciousness will help them to develop better. Women's subjective consciousness includes self-consciousness, a sense of competition, aggressive consciousness and a sense of innovation. Only in subjective awareness, women can play a major role in self-motivation, self-regulation and self-assessment. It is necessary to carry out educational activities conducive to women's self-confidence.

### 4.3 Parents Should Treat Children Equally

Parents can also do a variety of things to help reduce the impact of gender stereotypes on their children. Parents should make efforts to expose boys and girls to science and engineering, especially if girls are interested in these subjects. Parents should not assume that their children are not interested in school subjects just because she disagrees with her when she was young.

## 5 Conclusion

Human beings are the creators of language, but also become its learners and users. One of the most important variations between people is their gender. As a consequence, persons of different genders from either physiology or psychology will have their own gender characteristics in the learning and utilizing of language, which results in different tendencies in the study of language. Gender differences are a reflection of both the linguistic distinctions between men and women as well as their various attitudes and lifestyles.

This article points out the existence of gender differences in the process of Chinese students' English learning. In this article, the author will first give a brief introduction to the gender differences in English learning among Chinese students, then analyze the causes of gender differences in English learning, consisting of internal and external aspects, and finally propose effective and efficient strategies for learning English. By analyzing the relevant theoretical achievements in the field of sociolinguistics and reflecting on the characteristics of English learners in China, it discusses the causes of gender differences between male and female students, and puts forward some strategies to improve the level of Chinese people's English learning, aiming to improve the level of Chinese people's English learning, enhance the pertinence of English learning by taking account of gender differences of students, and to improve the efficiency of English learning in an all-round way and lay a necessary foundation for China's internationalization process. This study has some limitations and further studies on English learning strategies used by Chinese students should be conducted.

As what is mentioned above, language is the product of the objective world and in turn, influences the inner world of people. The gender differences in language reflect that the cultural psychology and social value orientation of language users are influenced not only by social and environmental pressures, but also by family culture and experience. There are many gender differences in English learning. In general, women are more gifted with language than men, but men are more accomplished and independent. Therefore, the study of this paper has important theoretical and practical significance. In addition, it is not only beneficial to the further understanding of the laws of the language system, but also beneficial to the specific linguistic research. Through the analysis, we can know that in the process of English learning, there are many reasons for gender differences. This fact should be faced and take effective strategies for eliminating the differences in the teaching process. For current school education, it is necessary to value the gender difference, to have a pertinent strengthening and education. But we should not exaggerate the gender difference in English



learning. With the spread of quality-oriented education, more and more people realize the importance of gender differences. In English teaching, only through the analysis of non-intellectual factors, can we propose the corresponding countermeasures to narrow the differences between men and women in English learning and promote their common progress in English learning. Teachers also should find the common psychological features between males and females, and then have purposeful, calculated and methodical teaching.

However, this article mainly takes Chinese students as an example to explore how gender factors affect English learning. There is a suggestion that future research can focus on the process of English learning in other countries, to form a more comprehensive understanding of gender differences and English learning.

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