



# Exploring Gender Differences in Language Learning

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**Abstract.** Nowadays, abundant achievements have been made in the study of gender differences in language learning. The individual differences of learners have been paid more attention to by foreign language teachers. Gender differences serve as crucial parts of language learning research. Moreover, the research on language learning between male and female students will be helpful for teachers to further understand the individual differences and teach students in accordance with their aptitude, thus boosting the reform of foreign language teaching. Furthermore, the language learning of both genders has been a concern in the educational area. Therefore, it is of great educational value to explore and fully use both internal and external aspects from the view of gender study.

**Keywords:** Gender differences · Language learning · Learning styles · Language use · Learning Strategies

## 1 Introduction

Language learning is a very complicated acquisition process. There are a great number of factors affecting language learning, among which gender is a very crucial one without being ignored. The gender difference in language learning is namely the difference between males and females that influence the teaching and learning process. Besides, numerous researchers at home and abroad have formed the same view on relevant studies and surveys of gender differences. The majority of them believe that girl students tend to behave better than boy students, and the differences seemingly have a tendency to expand. However, the research direction and starting point vary from the approaches adopted and the results obtained. Therefore, this paper will summarize and review the gender differences in motivation, attitude, autonomy, learning strategy use, learning style, the reasons for these differences, and the implications for language learning and teaching, which will pave a path for exploring the direction of future research, hoping to offer some enlightenment to language educators and learners [1].

## 2 Why Boys are in an Inferior Position?

Females are superior to males in foreign language learning. Especially in Asian countries, the disadvantages of males in language learning are greatly obvious. There are

numerous studies in China, Hong Kong, and Japan indicating that in foreign language learning classrooms, girls not only greatly surpass boys in number but also have a better performance in reading and writing than boys. In addition, girls also show a higher interest in foreign language learning than boys [2]. Therefore, this part mainly analyzes the reasons contributing to boys' underachievement of language learning and puts forward some proper suggestions and strategies for this phenomenon [3].

## **2.1 Different Attitudes Towards Language Learning**

A great number of studies have emphasized the importance of attitudinal factors in successful second language acquisition. In the process of learning a foreign language, people who appreciate the language, its speakers, and their culture are prone to be more successful than those who dislike it. Men and women have different attitudes towards language learning [2].

Burstall suggests that pupils with a favorable attitude towards learning French are also prone to have a favorable attitude towards learning other languages. Boys who don't like learning French also appear to be less enthusiastic about learning any other foreign language [4]. In addition, Burstall's research has confirmed that girls are more willing to learn French than boys in the UK. However, the different attitudes of males and females towards foreign language learning are definitely not innate. To some degree, they may be influenced by society and culture. Around the world, there is an inherent view demonstrating that learning a foreign language well might be thought admirable for girls while unmanly for boys. Studies in Japan and China have also shown some social factors. For instance, English is a feminized subject, and some professions related to English are also thought to be feminized. All of these will inhibit males' passion for learning English. In a word, these views and assumptions about gender differences mentioned above are taken as reasonable and invariable, which will affect children's subjective judgment and directly lead to boys' negative attitudes towards foreign language learning after growing up [3].

### **2.1.1 Motivation**

Generally, both males and females may be involved in their language studies for various reasons. They may feel motivated to learn by external and internal motives, such as the desire to obey rules or please teachers, the interests and benefits of language itself. Undoubtedly, students' gender has a significant impact on their language learning [5]. Lots of studies have confirmed that females, in general, have much stronger motivation than males and tend to show greater comprehensive motivation as well as a more positive attitude in foreign language learning. In the meantime, females boast a higher self-concept of language, showing greater passion for the target language and culture. In addition, their parents also take a greater interest and provide more support to their language learning. According to achievement theory, the focus of women's learning motivation is their inclination and dependence on others, and their satisfaction is obtained through the reaction of others. However, the focus of men's learning motivation is self-satisfaction and self-reliance. Moreover, research shows that boys aren't prone to try anything that seems boring, most of whom complain that learning a foreign language

is monotonous and tedious. More importantly, males are easily inclined to ascribe their less enthusiasm for language learning to the difficulty or boredom of the task itself or their lack of ability. In contrast, females tend to feel anxious and study harder [3].

### 2.1.2 Methods

Firstly, the stereotype should be changed. It is of great significance to change men's attitude toward foreign language learning, which requires teachers' efforts, parents' participation, and the interaction of society and culture. The backwardness of boys in foreign language learning is not only an educational problem but also a social problem to a great extent. Therefore, great efforts are still needed to eliminate the negative impact of "gender orientation."

Secondly, learning motivation and the classroom should be necessarily emphasized. Boys should be given more freedom in language learning so that they can feel the right to control what they have learned. Furthermore, as studies have indicated that boys prefer to engage in business and industry in the traditional perception of motivation, it tends to be an effective way to encourage them to learn a foreign language well by providing them with some foreign language courses that are of great practical value, which, in some way, can better meet boys' practical needs. Besides, the direction of textbook reform is that more topics in which boys are more interested are supposed to be offered to them. Meanwhile, clear guidance should also be provided to boys, such as systematic introduction activities in the process of reading long articles, free choice of different composition topics, role-playing in oral English, and so on.

Thirdly, the use of learning inertia patterns and learning strategies need to be taken into consideration in foreign language learning. According to the gender differences in learning inertia patterns, teachers should make students fully understand their own learning inertia patterns, so students can adjust their learning behavior and learning environment to better adapt to their unique learning habits. At the same time, boys need to be necessarily encouraged to apply more learning strategies through strategy training. In this way, teachers can be aware of the learning strategies that students are using, thus helping students understand which strategies they are more accustomed to and the reasons for using them. In addition, teachers should avoid falling into the misconception of "gender orientation" [2].

## 3 Autonomy and Gender

In recent years, the theory and practice of autonomy in language teaching and learning have aroused a series of widespread interest and attention. Holec gives autonomy a definition that it is the ability to serve a key role in one's own learning. When it comes to the differences between the girls' and boys' preferences for autonomous activities, a large number of research results indicate that girls seem to seize more opportunities, especially in trying new things in classroom activities, learning grammar by themselves, doing non-compulsory tasks and noting down new words and their meanings. As a consequence, girls are more likely to behave autonomously in and out of the classroom and benefit more from the opportunities of learning English than boys.

What's more, some results from the former studies show that female learners seem to have more inherent English learning motivation and become more engaged with decision-making processes related to learning than male learners. For example, they will make up their minds to talk to people from other countries or watch English TV programs by themselves. Besides, girls are inclined to play an active part in class and take the initiatives to learn a foreign language both inside and outside the classroom who are also more willing to undertake the responsibilities for language learning [6].

### **3.1 Implications for Inside and Outside Class Autonomous Language Learning Activities**

First and foremost, it is essential for language teachers to make great efforts to create an inclusive classroom atmosphere for all the students and treat the male and female students equally. Besides, attractive and thought-provoking activities and materials should be properly prepared for both male and female students. When teachers know and understand the students' beliefs in language learning, they make the audience in class energetic and passionate.

Secondly, Mori and Gobel suggest that when teachers design learning tasks and syllabi, they need to keep in mind that students' achievement value and intrinsic value should be regarded as independent motivational constructs. Therefore, they can guarantee that the goals and objectives of the assignments are closely linked with the students. From the perspective of Green and Oxford, it goes without saying that teachers must bear in mind that different learning strategies are suitable for different students, which indicates that students' personal strategy choices will be potentially influenced by various factors [7].

Thirdly, it is necessary for language teachers to increase the chances for students to learn English independently. However, any measures aiming at boosting learner autonomy require cautious consideration for the reason that despite the students might participate in some autonomous language learning activities in the language classroom, teachers still need to distribute some responsibilities to students as well as guide them on how to take advantage of the opportunities to use English outside the classroom [6].

Last but not least, from the point of feminist teaching practice's view, it is generally recognized that students will participate more actively in their learning if they are able to associate their individual learning with the challenges they encounter in life outside the classroom and invest in the curriculum. The languages and cultures of the participants have also become a significant aspect of the curriculum. Furthermore, in order to admit diversity and achieve equality as well as inclusiveness, teachers are more likely to introduce controversial topics that students haven't raised, in the process of which teachers often choose a problem-solving method and invite students to react to specific situations. Meanwhile, students start detailed discussions about how to deal with particular scenarios across languages and cultures, which improve their familiarity with gender and sexual alternative discourses and strengthen their ability to reflect critically [8].

## 4 Language Learning Styles

With the rapid development of educational psychology, learning style has gradually become a crucial research topic, especially the study of female learning styles. There is no doubt that the study of learning style is one of the main contents of learners' individual differences, and learners have their own unique learning styles. According to Dr. Dunn and his wife from St. John's University in the United States, learning style is a way for students to concentrate on selecting environment, emotion, new knowledge as well as skills and meeting their physical needs. In Reid's opinion, learning style, to some degree, refers to an individual's natural, habitual and inclined way of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills.

Although the connotation and definition of learning style are different, its core is that learning style is the skills and methods for individuals to absorb, internalize and cope with different information in the learning process, which boasts the characteristics of habit, uniqueness, and stability.

In a variety of language learning situations, each learner must perceive the external information and process, store, and extract it. In addition, due to the individual differences existing in the physiology and psychology of each learner, the speed at which each individual obtains information and the perception and response to stimuli are also different. In terms of learning, they form their own unique language learning styles. It is by applying the concept of learning style to foreign language teaching that Reid has deeply explored learning style from the perspective of perception. In Reid's opinion, learning style is the preferred sensory learning style of learners. Hence, it can be divided into three types: visual type, auditory type, and hands-on type (that is, the combined term of kinesthetic type and tactile type in early research).

Based on the characteristics of females' physiology, psychology and personality, their linguistic style demonstrates the following three features: The first feature is that women's language learning style has distinct individual characteristics. And the second one is that their language learning style tends to be relatively stable. The third one is that their linguistic style is prone to be relatively permeable [9].

### 4.1 Gender Differences in Language Learning Styles

Learning styles are divided into three main kinds by Joy M. Reid (2002): sensory learning style, cognitive learning style, and personality learning style. These three aspects will lay a foundation for the study of the relationship between language learning styles and gender.

Sensory learning style refers to learners' preference for perceiving information in different perceptual ways, including four major modes: visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic styles. Visual learners, to put it popularly, are those who learn things by seeing them. They are prone to read and study charts, drawings, and other graphical information. In language teaching and learning, numerous data have shown that there is no obvious gender difference. Besides, learners with an auditory style are able to learn best when they first listen to oral instructions, such as various lectures, discussions, or recordings. Their distinctive features are that they are fond of listening to lectures and audiotapes. According to a great deal of research, one thing worth paying attention to is

that the number of female in auditory learners far outweighs that of males. Moreover, those learners with tactile preferences find it necessary to underline while reading and take notes while listening. Also, they need to keep their hands busy. In language learning, they need to touch objects with their hands, combined with a manual operations such as puzzles and handicrafts to establish a real learning atmosphere. The learners with the kinesthetic preference show the best learning status when fully engaged with the process of learning. More importantly, under the influence of psychological factors and gender identity awareness, males are likely to behave more aggressively and sensitively to spatial relationships, which results in the phenomenon that the number of males in tactile and kinesthetic learners far outweighs that of females.

Cognitive learning style refers to the preferences of individuals in the process of receiving, organizing, and retrieving information, which can be divided into these two pairs of distinct learning styles: field-independent/ field-dependent styles and reflective/ impulsive styles, respectively. According to the survey, there are significant differences in field-independent and field-dependent styles between men and women. Men are usually prone to be more field-independent with excellent spatial, logical thinking, and analytical skills. Furthermore, they prefer a formal learning environment and do better in a detailed analysis of reading comprehension and close tests. Women tend to be more field-dependent and more sensitive to their social surroundings with a shorter attention span. Besides, they have a preference for the informal learning environment, showing a better gift for grasping the gist of the article and the communicative aspects of language learning.

Reflective learners are more inclined to take the solution into consideration before making a decision and are more likely to offer more reasonable answers. It has been proved that despite their reading speed being slower, they are instead more accurate and their inductive reasoning is better. Impulsive learners, who usually read faster, tend to give the first answer appearing in their mind even if it is often false. Men are prone to be more impulsive, attaching great importance to language fluency instead of accuracy and behaving actively in answering questions in the language classroom. On the contrary, women usually tend to be more reflective and concentrate more on the accuracy of language, as a consequence of which they react more slowly than men in the class and are usually in a state of waiting and listening.

Personality learning style is the preferred approach to gain and incorporate information according to the different personalities of language learners, which can be divided into extroverted and introverted styles. Extroverted language learners can achieve better learning results through individual experience in the process of interacting with others. Introverted language learners are able to better their learning as well as master conception brilliantly in a relatively independent learning environment. In addition, the survey of Pei & Dou on 252 non-English-major students on their learning styles has indicated that men are inclined to be more extroverted while women tend to be more introverted. However, the difference in personality learning styles between men and women isn't apparent [10].

#### 4.1.1 Suggestions for Language Learning Styles

In the teaching process of language learning, teachers can carry out diversified teaching based on students' different learning styles.

Firstly, classroom teaching, questionnaires, and other forms need to be implemented carefully to get knowledge of different types of students' learning styles. It is of great significance for teachers to get familiar with "theoretical knowledge of learning styles" as well as combine it with the understanding of daily classroom teaching. Moreover, teachers also need to discuss and analyze the knowledge of learning styles with students frequently, which, to some degree, can help students deeply understand their own kinds of learning styles.

Secondly, the classroom teaching design should be carried out efficiently based on the types of learning styles. After understanding the student's learning styles, it is greatly necessary for teachers to explore the classroom teaching pattern that is coordinated with the student's learning styles. What's more, there is no denying that syllabus, teaching structure, teaching content, teaching methods and means, teaching media as well as teaching management should be taken into careful consideration to better design the teaching process, which contributes to creating a "student-centered" teaching atmosphere. Furthermore, teachers can start from students' different learning styles to design a variety of teaching assignments on the basis of students' individual differences. It is by stimulating students' various senses and consciously guiding as well as expanding students' styles that students are able to achieve excellent learning results [9].

Thirdly, teachers are supposed to help students get rid of the negative influence of gender orientation and establish a correct concept of gender differences. Besides, it is crucial for teachers to try their utmost to overcome the stereotype of gender roles as well as inculcate students with a correct learning attitude, which will be instrumental in making students form a clear understanding of their own strengths and build up their self-confidence. Furthermore, proper measures can be used to stimulate their learning motivation, such as providing boys with foreign language courses of more practical value, and offering boys more scientific and technological articles to read. Additionally, teachers also need to attach great importance to dredging the learning psychology of girls and enhancing their tolerance of foreign language ambiguity, as a result of which female students can effectively reduce the degree of anxiety in their foreign language learning [1].

## 5 Gender Differences in Language Use

The knowledge of the differences in language use contributes to language learners a lot, and gender differences may exist in not only one but all languages. There is no doubt that language teachers are supposed to attach much importance to the study of gender in language use. Since different genders have different communicative principles, the differences in the speech between men and women count a lot in English learning.

In the process of socialization, people can gain cultural and gender identity through interaction. Cultural differences indeed exist in gender roles. From females' perspective, they tend to be considerate and full of sympathy. Besides, their speech is prone to be

united, and they are more concerned about emotion, intimacy, and relationship in conversation. However, males tend to show their authority, self-confidence, and assertiveness. Moreover, they prefer competition and the domination of speech so that they can appeal to more audience members. Additionally, they also tend to be utterances- and action-precedent when convincing others. And during the communication, they are inclined to exchange ideas. Their speech is prone to be independent, and they take a great interest in business, military, politics, sports, and geography.

When it comes to different paralinguistic features, many researchers have found that females are prone to have higher-pitched voices and greater pitch ranges than males. However, there is one interesting thing in order to match their voice with their position as British prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher narrowed her pitch range, lowered her tone, and spoke at a slower speed [11].

### **5.1 Contrast Analysis of the Speech Between Males and Females in Daily Conversation**

In daily conversations, the speech of women is different from that of men. Meanwhile, men and women are also different in the kinds of language used for the reason that men and women usually play distinctly different roles in our society. Therefore, the differences between male and female speeches can be analyzed from many aspects, such as the purposes of the speech and the topics of the speech. Besides, many differences may stem from different social practices.

In terms of the purposes of the conversation, it is obvious that males and females have their own purposes in daily conversation. In women's speeches, they mainly want to convey their feelings and listen to others. Their speaking style tends to be more submissive and negative. On the contrary, the aim of males' speech appears to be task-oriented, and males usually have more analytical methods, so naturally, they attempt to solve problems and troubles through interaction. Besides, seldom do they express their intimate feelings to others. They hope that they can provide information and solutions as well as show their independence in dialogue. Hence, as described above, males' purposes of the conversation are totally different from those of females.

As for the topics of the conversation, it goes without saying that there are differences between males' and females' topics in conversation. The theme of the females is mainly related to emotion and social life, which, absolutely, is closely associated with their social status, occupation, and personality. Moreover, females' speech is considered trivial and gossip, for they mainly discuss clothing, love, family, daily trivia, experience, emotion, diet, and life issues in the females' speech community. They hope to strengthen their membership in the community through the speech. In reverse, males have a preference for these topics covering business, politics, law, sports, geography, economy, military, and so on. In addition, their stable position in society can be easily reflected in these aspects mentioned above [12].



### 5.1.1 Implications for Gender Differences in Language Use

Based on some discussion, there are exactly gender differences existing in language application, which has revealed that people should pay more attention to these differences. Due to the fact that it is hard to avert incorrect communication between men and women during interaction, people had better cope with gender differences in language use from a dialectical point of view [5].

Additionally, the quiet girls should be paid more attention to by teachers, and their replies are supposed to enjoy a longer wait than usual. Besides, teachers have the responsibility to encourage girls to actively participate in dialogue and classroom assignments. At the same time, it is important for teachers to cautiously arrange classroom activities and select non-sexist textbooks as well as class themes that are more in line with the common interests of boys and girls, which can encourage and attract more interaction among girls [11].

In a word, it's of great significance to realize that communicative strategies and styles in different genders' communication cultures may vary from different communicative principles, which can result in some unnecessary misunderstandings. Therefore, gender differences in language use should be understood clearly so that teachers can teach students the appropriate forms of utterances. Furthermore, the speech patterns or styles of English-speaking men and women are of great necessity to be taken into consideration in the teaching process and gender study [12].

## 6 Gender Differences in the Use of English Vocabulary Learning Strategies in Chinese Senior Schools and Language Learning Strategy Use

There is no doubt that vocabulary teaching and learning serves a crucial issue for English teachers and students, especially in senior schools in China. According to numerous studies before, there indeed exists some gender differences in the use of English vocabulary learning strategies, which has aroused much attention of many researchers.

The differences are mainly due to the fact that males and females have different types of cognitive styles, motivations, and personalities. Under the influence of Chinese traditional culture, girls are usually inclined to behave more carefully and attentively in language classes and are also likely to spend more time making plans and repeating words with great patience. Instead, boys seldom arrange relevant plan-making and reviewing tasks for themselves. Therefore, it has obviously demonstrated that girl students are possible to apply meta-cognitive strategies more in vocabulary study than boy students.

What's more, girls also tend to adopt more cognitive strategies to have a good understanding and creation of the language, including repetition, note-taking, and translation. In terms of dictionary use, it is the most convenient way (if there is no Internet) for both boy and girl students to master lots of new words and obtain more specific sample sentences. However, abundant research results have indicated that girl students will find it more useful to make use of a dictionary than boy students for the reason that girls are inclined to understand the complete meaning and use it after looking up the dictionary while boys usually keep in mind that only knowing the meaning is enough. Furthermore,

note-taking and repetition are both widely used by girls because they can greatly help memorize a number of words and sentence structures [13].

It goes without saying that learning strategies serve a key role in the process of language learning, the appropriate use of which indeed influences the autonomous study effect. In general, females, more often than not, tend to use greater numbers of strategies than males for language learning. The reasons can be listed: Firstly, they have more favorable attitudes and confidence toward language learning. Secondly, they are more open to new linguistic forms in a foreign language and more active to apply some learning methods to make it easier and more effective. Thirdly, females are usually better language learners than males and possibly superior in verbal aptitude, showing more interest in language learning [14].

### **6.1 Implications for Gender Differences in Language Learning Strategy Use**

The above differences between male and female students in English vocabulary learning and language learning use have indicated that despite female students being better than male students in most aspects, there are still many proper measures for teachers to carry out to improve the language learning strategy use of male and female students.

First of all, teachers should make full use of boys' strengths, such as their wide range of interests and strong desire for knowledge, to encourage them to do more reading. Besides, based on boys' various interests, teachers can recommend some interesting English books to them, as a consequence of which boys are able to really achieve the purpose of English learning by reading, and students can learn English in a relatively free and comfortable environment [15].

Secondly, foreign language teachers are supposed to pay attention to observing the students carefully and having a better understanding of their merits and demerits than before. One important thing worth mentioning is that teachers need to arouse awareness of the differences between male and female students in language learning class, which can greatly give them a clearer knowledge of their learning styles and methods as well as goals.

Thirdly, teachers need to enhance the research of teaching theory and reflect more on the traditional teaching conception and methodology. Moreover, girls can be encouraged to practice more words and sentences in listening and speaking class by teachers while boys should attach much importance to regular vocabulary memory and task completion. To sum up, teachers can also attempt to assign personalized tasks to boys and girls, which they may not have done well before [13].

## **7 Conclusion**

To sum up, for parents, learners, and educators, the teaching and learning of a foreign language has been widely concerned about and highly valued. However, there are many factors contributing to the achievements of language learning. Also, there are external and internal factors that affect, such as social environment, personal and cultural background, gender, motivation, attitude, the style and use of language, autonomy, personality, and so on. Gender differences indeed have a remarkable impact on language learning, hence

male and female students can be taught according to different and proper teaching approaches in the process of language teaching [15]. From the analysis of the above aspects, it has been demonstrated that compared with male learners, female learners consider it more valuable to learn English and have a preference for learning foreign languages. They tend to have higher emotional and communicative motivation. Their parents have a more positive attitude towards their English learning. More importantly, it has been found that female students are inclined to use more learning strategies than male students, no matter which language female students learn [16].

All in all, language educators should get acquainted with the gender differences of students as well as the relationship between gender differences and language learning. Besides, it is significant for language educators to create a relatively equal learning environment and make full use of males' and females' different strengths in their language learning, which can promote their potential to be developed to the maximum degree. In the meantime, much attention should be paid to excavating and discovering the similarities between men and women in language learning. It is of great importance to put gender as a variable in a larger context to explore the relationship between gender and language learning comprehensively and objectively [1].

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