

GENDER PERSPECTIVE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The last decades of the twentieth century saw many concerted efforts in research into gender issues all over the world. The study of language and gender has increasingly become the study of discourse and gender. The differences between approaches are especially evident when examining how various strands of discourse analysis interact with the field of language and gender studies, which has its own tradition of controversy and scholarly disagreement. This study intended to explore the language learning strategies used by learners of English as a foreign language at Haramaya University, and to find out the difference in strategy use between genders and its influence on their achievement in English. Mixed method research was employed for the study, which is mainly qualitative, but also uses quantitative techniques for triangulation purposes. The Sample were HU EFL Students (250 male and female). The data were analyzed through SPSS version 20 and using the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), the study examines the relationship of language learning strategies, gender and achievement in learning the target language. To reveal the interconnections between these factors 5 point Likert scale was used. Mean and standard deviation, were performed on the gathered data to interpret the extent of dispersion. The *t*-test was used as an additional data analysis procedure that is appropriate for interval scale items. The findings of the study revealed that use of language learning strategies was very effective, in that, females were significantly more successful than males, and that they used more language learning strategies in learning English. This is expected to lead to gender development in the area of language learning at tertiary level.

KEYWORDS: Gender, Language, Strategies, Language Learning Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Language use is a social practice that shapes other practices within the society. The relationship between social practices (linguistic practices and gender roles/reasons/identities) is a dialectal one, a two-way process. This means that language both influences and is influenced by societal practices including those pertaining to gender. Hence language plays a huge role in gender issues. Sunderland (1994) argues that multifaceted gendering is brought about and reinforced by the English classroom. The fact that the English language itself is gendered may lead to gendered outlook of the world and gendered use of the language as reflected in the gender-differentiated use of language in conversations and discussions. A closer look at the historical development of the gender concept in language studies will reveal that the perspectives and the philosophies underlying the research have changed over time. Research on language and gender and theoretical shifts in the field result from real-world changes brought about by political movements and therefore represent not only differences in academic perspectives on gender and language, but also changes across time in how gender and language are perceived to work in the world (Cameron, 2004). Gender is not something we are born with, and not something we *have*,

but something we *do*, something we *perform* (Butler 1990). The world swarms with ideas about gender -- and these ideas are so commonplace that we take them for granted that they are true, accepting common adage as scientific fact. *Gender and Language* defines gender along two key dimensions. First, gender is a key element of social relationships often loosely linked to perceived differences between the sexes. Gender relations are encoded in linguistic and symbolic representations, normative concepts, social practices, institutions and social identities. Second, gender is a primary arena for articulating power, intersecting in complex ways with other axes of inequality, like class, race, and sexuality. Gender is understood as multi-faceted, always changing, and often contested (Nelson and Devardhi, 2012). This study **“Gender perspective and Language learning strategy in the EFL classroom”** aims to find the amount of strategies used, the difference in strategies used between genders, and their influence on their achievement in English as used by learners of English as a foreign language at Haramaya University.

According to Cameron (1995), "a crude historical-typological account of feminist linguistic approaches since 1973 would probably distinguish between three models of language and gender, the deficit model, the cultural difference model and the dominance model. The Deficit model accepts the speech of men as the norm and perceives the women's speech to be deficient. This interpretation accorded well with one of the assumptions made by early gender scholars such as Lakoff (1975), who saw women's language as the "language of powerlessness," a reflection of their subordinate place in relation to men. Block (2002) states that the view of gender is essentialized in that it is about having certain characteristics, which are determined by the environment, and which are stable throughout one's lifetime. It is also imminently conservative in that it requires that women follow modes of behavior laid down by men, as opposed to challenging them. In Cultural Difference model men and women are socialized into different ways of relating to one another in their predominately same-sex interactions and, thus, acquire different communicative styles within the community they live in. It adopts the socially liberal position that men and women are different, but equal: women's speech and communication styles are not inferior to men's; rather the relationship between the two is problematic at least in part because of culture. Further in the Dominance model, women are perceived to perform their 'woman-ness' in an ethno-methodological frame as they continually negotiate their position of relative powerlessness vis a vis men" (Block, 2002). Second language research, therefore, shifted from the positivistic conceptualization of gender as an individual variable to a constructivist view of gender as social relations operating within complex systems that have led to richer understandings of the relations between gender and language learning across societies, communities, and classrooms (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004).

Education is a vital tool in achieving gender autonomy empowerment of women and men addressing gender gaps in distribution opportunities and resources. Gender differences are, actually, a fundamental fact of sociolinguistic life and it is not surprising that they are reflected in language. In other words, there are certain forms of language which are appropriate only for use by men and other forms which only women may use. In some cases, these differences depend not only on the gender of the addresser, but also on the gender of the addressee (Ansary and Babaii, 2003). A number of scholars (Ehrman and Oxford, 1990; Ellis, 1994; Oxford, 1993) continue to assume female superiority in language development, with the claim that females have an advantage over males in language acquisition both in L1 and L2. Trudgill (1974) showed that women used the prestige variants more frequently than men and related this phenomenon to female social insecurity. Differences between male and female L1 learners appear more in studies conducted in bilingual settings, and such studies favor female learners in acquiring the languages they are exposed to.

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

All language learning strategies serve the main goal of communicative competence. It has the potential to be an extremely powerful learning tool. Language learning strategies are flexible; that is, they are not always in the same sequences or certain patterns. There is a variety and individuality in the way that learners choose and utilize strategies. Oxford (1990) stated that grouping of the language learning strategies complies with the characteristics of good language learners in employing learning strategies. She classified learning strategies into six groups: *memory strategies* (which relate to how students remember language), *cognitive strategies* (which relate to how students think about their learning), *compensation strategies* (which enable students to make up for limited knowledge), *metacognitive strategies* (relating to how students manage their own learning), *affective strategies* (relating to students' feelings) and *social strategies* (which involve learning by interaction with others). Language learning strategies are flexible, that is, they are not always in the same sequences or certain patterns. There is a variety and individuality in the way that learners choose and utilize strategies. Studies conducted around the world, showed that students who were better in their learning the target language usually reported higher levels of overall strategy use. Besides, those successful learners employed many strategy categories together. Language performance of the learners was tested in many different ways in relation to strategy use in several studies as "self-ratings of proficiency. Green and Oxford (1995) discovered that high-achieving students used all kinds of language learning strategies more frequently than low-achieving students. The differences between approaches are especially evident when examining how various strands of discourse analysis interact with the field of language and gender studies, which has its own tradition of scholarly debate.

METHODOLOGY

Mixed methods approach was employed for the study, which is mainly qualitative, but quantitative techniques were also used for triangulation purposes. The data were analyzed through SPSS version 20 and using the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The study examines the relationship of language learning strategies, gender and achievement in learning the target language. To reveal the interconnections between these factors, mean and standard deviation, were performed on the gathered data to interpret the extent of dispersion. The SILL uses five Likert-type responses for each strategy item ranging from 1 to 5. Once completed, the SILL data furnishes a composite score for each category of strategy. A reporting scale can be used to tell teachers and students which groups of strategies they use the most in learning English: (1) 'High Usage' (3.5–5.0), (2) 'Medium Usage' (2.5–3.4), and (3) 'Low Usage' (1.0–2.4). Scale ranges were developed by Oxford (1990).

PARTICIPANTS

The participants of the study were the learners of English as a foreign language at Haramaya University. Due to the course system used in the institution, their proficiency levels were the same. Within the period of the course, students received 32 hours of instruction per week focusing on all the four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening). As the main course the book, "College English" was used to teach the course "Communicative English Skills" that taught the students all the four skills. In addition to this standardization in the instruction, Continuous assessment of 50 marks and final examination of 50 marks for all the students was carried out through uniform testing devices.

Every item of testing had a fixed percentage and if the students could get 50% in total out of all these assessments,

they passed to the next level which was based on the fixed and standardized grading system followed across the University as shown in Figure 1 the academic ability of male and female participants.

The participants consisted of 250 students. Ratio of gender was male participants 165 (66%) and female participants 85 (34%). Figure 2 shows that the number of the males was higher than the females in the study, because there were slightly more male students in the institution and the questionnaires were distributed to the whole class without considering the male/female ratio.

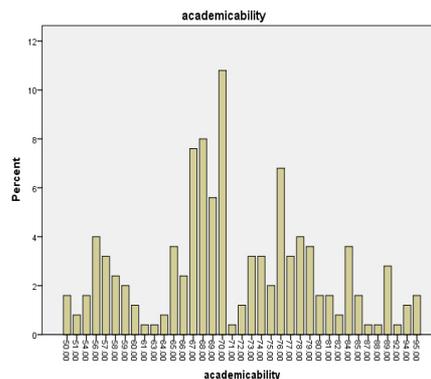


Figure 1: Percentage of Academic Ability of Male and Female Participants

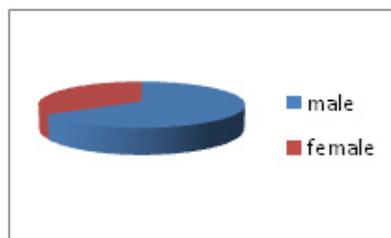


Figure 2: Ratio of Male and Female Participants

DATA ANALYSES AND FINDINGS

The qualitative data collected through the classroom observation and test papers were organized and interpreted qualitatively. The quantitative data collected through Questionnaire and interviews were analyzed using Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS version 20). In most statistics packages it is relatively easy to compute this type of Item-Total correlation which is based on 5 point Likert scale. Each respondent was asked to rate each item on some response scale. For instance, they could rate each item on a 1-to-5 response scale where: strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree and strongly agree. The final score for the respondent on the scale is the sum of their ratings for all of the items (this is why this is sometimes called a "summated" scale). Numbers assigned to Likert-type items express a "greater than" relationship; however, how much greater is not implied. Because of these conditions, Likert-type items fall into the ordinal measurement scale. Likert scale items are created by calculating a composite score (mean) from four or more type Likert-type items; therefore, the composite score for Likert scales should be analyzed at the interval measurement scale. Descriptive statistics recommended for interval scale items include the mean for central tendency and standard deviations for variability. Additional data analysis procedures appropriate for interval scale items would include the *t*-test.

The SILL was administrated to ESL students by the classroom teacher during a regular class period.

Instructions regarding the procedures of administration were provided and discussed with the instructor of the classes before the administration. The students were told that there were no right or wrong answers to any question and that their confidentiality was secured and their response would be used for research purposes only. They were also informed that while their participation would not affect their grades, they still had the option not to participate. However, all students chose to fill out the surveys.

GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

Since 1970s, sociolinguists have become interested in the relationship between language and gender, and they consider all the behavioral variations, achievements in foreign languages included, explicable by cultural factors, hence by socially constructed gender differences (Sunderland, 2000). Gender has a significant role in our social interaction; it influences the perception of people. Moreover, in the society people's behavior is assessed through gender norms. Recent work examining gender from this perspective (e.g., Cameron 2005; Coates 2004; Davis & Skilton-Sylvester 2004; Ehrlich 1997; Kubota 2003; Norton 2000; Norton & Pavlenko 2004; Pavlenko 2001; Schmenk 2004; Sunderland 1992, 1998, 2000a, 2000b; Tannen 1996; Willett 1996) problematizes certain essentialist language learning and classroom myths, such as female superiority in language learning and male dominance in mixed-gender classrooms. As a result, it is worth considering that "the way that gender identities get constructed in particular communities may have very concrete consequences for the kinds of second language proficiency developed by men and women"(Ehrlich, (1997). However, the *kinds* of interaction given to girls and boys, was that interaction directed at the boys was more often disciplinary in nature, less often required a response in the L2, and less often required more than a minimal response of one word. Interaction directed at the girls more often required a response in the L2 and more often required more than a minimal response. As a result, the girls were being constructed by the teacher as a more academic group than the boys, perhaps in accordance with the myth of female superiority in language learning, or perhaps because these girls simply were more academic.

In communicative approach of language teaching, classroom interaction became an important feature of second language. It can occur between the teacher and learners themselves, either collectively or individually. Teacher-students interaction is very important in the teaching and learning process because students benefit from this interaction both at the social and academic level. Verbally active student are more likely to be high achievers and student develop their cognitive skill.

Learner-Learner interaction is another way of interaction which takes place into EFL classroom among the learners. According to Long and Porter, learner-learner interaction pattern is an attractive alternative to teacher learner interaction. "Learners express a wide range of language function in group or learner-learner interaction" and in on reading, listening and speaking activities. This kind of interaction enhances the quality of classroom practice among both boys and girls, apart from the linguistic and communicative competence of the learner. However, gender plays a pivotal role; boys and girls do not totally show identical behavior in classroom.

This is determined by the way boys are socialized into an active, independent and aggressive role. Furthermore, it is believed that girls and boys live in different sub-culture analogue to distinct sub-culture associated those from different class or ethnic background (Tannen, 1990). Consequently, male and female grow up with different conventions for verbal interaction.

RELATION BETWEEN SUCCESS IN ENGLISH AND THE LANGUAGE LEARNING APPROACH

First of all, Based on the students average marks the tests were divided into four groups from the lowest to the highest. Group 1 consisted of the students whose averages ranged between 30 and 40; the averages of Group 2 were between 41 and 50; the averages of Group 3 were between 51 and 70; and finally the averages of Group 4 were between 71 and 100.

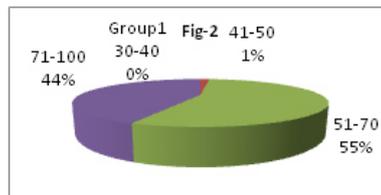


Figure 3: Allocation of Scores in the Four Groups

Figure 3 shows that there were zero scores in the first group, 4(1%) in the second, 137 (55%) in the third and 109(44 %) in the fourth. The majority of the scores were allocated in the third and the fourth group. In the study it showed that there was a steady increase in the use of language learning approach across the success groups, the findings also revealed that higher achieving students used more language learning strategies.

It confirmed that achievement encompasses actual accomplishment of the students' of potential ability. In most studies conducted, students generally reported higher levels of overall strategy use and they used a wide variety of approaches from different categories. As Chamot (1989) states "Students who think and work strategically are more motivated to learn and have a higher sense of self-efficacy or confidence in their own learning ability".

THE LANGUAGE LEARNING APPROACHES USED BY BOTH THE GENDER

An independent samples *t*-test was applied to the data set containing the overall strategy use averages and genders of the students. It was interpreted that female students used more language learning strategies than the male students. As Table 1 reflects, the mean value of females was higher than the males. Further the language learning approach used by both the gender using the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) was analyzed under the direct strategy and indirect strategy subscale.

Table 1: Group Statistics of the Gender for Overall Strategy Use

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Academic Ability	M	165	70.78	9.838	.766
	F	85	71.68	9.386	1.018

In the SILL, language learning strategies were grouped into six categories for assessment: Memory strategies for storing and retrieving information, Cognitive strategies for understanding and producing the language, Compensation strategies for overcoming limitations in language learning, Meta cognitive strategies for planning and monitoring learning, Affective strategies for controlling emotions, motivation, and Social strategies for cooperating with others in language learning.

Table 2: Group Statistics of the Language Learning Strategies

	Gender		Statistic	Bootstrap ^a			
				Bias	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower	Upper
Memory Strategy	M	N	165				
		Mean	1.7636	-.0041	.0601	1.6394	1.8774
		Std. Deviation	.75620	-.00300	.04220	.66256	.83756
		Std. Error Mean	.05887				
	F	N	85				
		Mean	2.8824	.0018	.0929	2.6911	3.0724
		Std. Deviation	.87847	-.01145	.06953	.72722	.99753
		Std. Error Mean	.09528				
Cognitive Strategy	M	N	165				
		Mean	2.7636	.0062	.0401	2.6904	2.8510
		Std. Deviation	.53977	-.00307	.02719	.48698	.59385
		Std. Error Mean	.04202				
	F	N	85				
		Mean	3.0941	-.0029	.0565	2.9752	3.2024
		Std. Deviation	.50293	-.00715	.04704	.38470	.58169
		Std. Error Mean	.05455				
Compensation Strategy	M	N	165				
		Mean	2.3152	.0024	.0608	2.1941	2.4366
		Std. Deviation	.77149	-.00266	.03489	.69564	.84473
		Std. Error Mean	.06006				
	F	N	85				
		Mean	2.9294	.0006	.0614	2.8044	3.0401
		Std. Deviation	.59338	-.00668	.06837	.44846	.71070
		Std. Error Mean	.06436				
Metacognitive	M	N	165				
		Mean	2.6061	.0034	.0434	2.5105	2.6851
		Std. Deviation	.54880	-.00018	.02094	.50793	.59239
		Std. Error Mean	.04272				
	F	N	85				
		Mean	3.1176	.0020	.0593	3.0000	3.2471
		Std. Deviation	.58578	-.01152	.05284	.47349	.67331
		Std. Error Mean	.06354				
Affective Strategy	M	N	165				
		Mean	2.3030	.0000	.0596	2.1803	2.4084
		Std. Deviation	.73604	-.00250	.03225	.67022	.79672
		Std. Error Mean	.05730				
	F	N	85				
		Mean	2.6824	-.0041	.0581	2.5676	2.7969
		Std. Deviation	.51667	-.00683	.03085	.45318	.57096
		Std. Error Mean	.05604				
Social Strategy	M	N	165				

		Table 2 Contd.,				
	Mean	1.9818	.0033	.0659	1.8476	2.1262
	Std. Deviation	.78455	-.00450	.02614	.72004	.82838
	Std. Error Mean	.06108				
	N	85				
F	Mean	2.7294	-.0032	.0570	2.6069	2.8396
	Std. Deviation	.54310	-.00416	.04252	.45590	.63173
	Std. Error Mean	.05891				

As can be seen in table 2, in the language learning strategies used by the female the mean values were more than the male in all the categories. According to the analyses, more indirect strategies than direct approaches were used by the students while learning English. For example under direct strategies – memory strategies including items like “I memorize English words by making a image in which the word might be used”, cognitive strategies such as “I try to find similar words in native language that are alike the words in English”, “I practice to pronounce difficult English words”, and indirect strategies –meta-cognitive strategies with items like “I pay attention when someone is speaking English.”, affective strategies like “I convince myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake”. The use of direct strategies of males and females was significant, which indicated the fact that females, on average, employed more direct strategies like memory, and cognitive strategies than males was significant. The females surpassed the males slightly in using indirect strategies like meta-cognitive and affective as well. In all the subscales female participants employed more language learning strategies. It was also found that there was a significant difference in learning styles between males and females. Males tended to use more visual learning styles while females preferred auditory learning styles. As Oxford (1990) stated they were key to learn a language. In terms of gender difference, the studies do not say much about their success levels, yet almost all of them reflect a significant female superiority in terms of language learning strategy use. For further reliability, Levene’s Test for equality of variance is needed to be executed to reveal the variances.

Table 3: Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Academic Ability	Equal variances assumed	.017	.896	-.696	248	.487	-.901	1.293	-3.448	1.647
	Equal variances not assumed			-.707	176.949	.481	-.901	1.274	-3.415	1.614

According to *Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances*, the Sig. value was.8961. Therefore, it can be assumed that the variances were equal. Then, it is possible to test using the *Equal Variances Assumed* row of the *t*-test in Table 3 This provided $t=-.696$, $df=248$, and $sig.(2-tailed)=.487$. Therefore the amount of strategies in the subscales used by female students is significantly more than the strategies that male students used are confirmed. A study of language and gender therefore treats language as an instrument for articulating and reflecting the various gender orders and resultant

categories. The success in the academic achievement of the female students' was due to the positive academic-self concept (trust in one's academic ability) and global self-concept (belief in one's overall worth). According to the females they did not consider male students as academically superior to female students. This may be due to the fact that they have good scholastic records which may have proved to them that they can function academically as well as males. There is an assumption also that female students have a better English self-concept which may be taken as a subarea of academic self-concept.

RELATION WITH PREVIOUS STUDIES

The findings do support previous work of Coyle et al (2007) Politzer's (1983) work that can be cited as one of the first empirical studies that discovered gender differences in language learning strategy use. The sample for the study comprised 90 American students in a university context. The findings revealed that female students use social strategies significantly more than male students. Then, Ehrman and Oxford (1989) conducted a study on the relationship between gender and strategy use of different occupational groups. They found that a much more frequent use of four strategy categories (general learning, functional, searching for/communicating meaning, and self-management) by female students.

CONCLUSIONS

The study "*Gender perspective and Language learning strategy in the EFL classroom*", intended to explore the language learning strategies used by learners of English as a foreign language at Haramaya University, and to find out the difference in strategy use between genders and its influence on their achievement in English. Females have consistently been reported of using Language Learning Strategies more frequently than males. If the students properly learn how and when to use language learning strategies, they become self-reliant, and better to learn independently (Oxford, 1990). One of the factors which might affect learners' language learning strategy use is gender. The study showed that there was a connection between gender and achievement. The achievement test results average of the female students were higher than the average scores of the male students, and the difference was proved to be significant with the follow up statistical procedures. The distribution of the scores also showed that female students were more successful than male students as their scores were located higher on the scale; and despite a few high scores, the great majority of the male scores were located lower than the female scores.

According to the analyses, taking all the participants into account, more indirect strategies than direct strategies were used by the students while learning English. As Schmenk (2004) argues: Instead of looking at what males are like and what females are like and constructing generalized images of male and female language learners accordingly, critical voices note that language learners are themselves constantly constructing and reconstructing their identities in specific contexts and communities. To understand these processes and reflect on their possible implications for language learning and teaching, English language teachers, researchers, and teacher educators need to take into account individual learners and their respective positioning in particular social and cultural contexts.

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