

Investigating Gender-specific Differences in Language Learning Strategies: The Case of EFL Undergraduate Students of Djillali Liabes University



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Summary:

This research work aims to explore gender-specific differences in the use of learning strategies among EFL students. To reach the research objectives, 80 undergraduate EFL students from Djillali Liabes university have been chosen as participants. As a quantitative research method, a semi-structured questionnaire has been used to examine the situation under investigation. Participants were given a list of language attempt to learning strategies and they were asked to rate the extent to which they use such strategies in their learning process. The findings showed gender is one of the variables that affect the choices of learning strategies among the chosen participants. Moreover, there is an apparent difference between males and females' use of learning strategies

Keywords: Gender; Learning strategies; Gender-specific differences; Impact

1. INTRODUCTION

The term 'gender' refers to the classification that denotes the construction of the categories 'masculine' and 'feminine' in society. Many researches addressed topics related to language and gender. Their interest was to examine language differences between males and females and the reasons for these dissimilarities. These empirical studies of language use were particularly influential in the field of FL teaching and learning.

2. Literature Review

Language and gender have been the subject of debate among researchers who have come to realize that male-female differences in language use are clear-cut due to the complexity of gender-based patterns of language and other social related issues. Gender is considered

to be a social variable that should be taken into account when describing language use in society. Indeed, gender interacts with other social variables like age and social class and therefore affects language use.

Tannen (1990) has viewed that men and women are different in language use in general. One example is that there is a tendency for men to use language to preserve their independence and maintain their position. Conversely, women use language to create connection and identity. Tannen (1990) refers to male speech as conflictive and female speech as cooperative.

On the other hand, (Lakoff, 1990, p.204) proposed a list of features characterizing women's speech, related mostly to vocabulary and syntactic structures. It identified the following characteristics of women's language:

- 1- Hedges, e.g. sort of, kind of, I guess;
- 2- (Super) polite forms e.g. Would you, please...I'd really appreciate if...
- 3- Tag questions;
- 4- Speaking in italics, e.g. emphatic so and very
- 5- Empty adjectives, e.g. charming, sweet, adorable;
- 6- Correct grammar and pronunciation;
- 7- Lack of sense of humour e.g. poor at telling jokes;
- 8- Direct quotations
- 9- Special vocabulary, e.g. specialised colour terms like 'Dove grey'.
- 10- Question intonation in declarative contexts.

It has been widely acknowledged among scholars that males and females differ not only in language use as clarified in the aforementioned definitions. Yet, the differences also occur when it comes to learning a language. For instance, Ehrman and Oxford (1989) asserted that women used more learning strategies compared to men. In addition, females are more aware of their use of strategies to facilitate their learning (Oxford, 1990). On the other hand, men are more likely to use abstract conceptualization mode of learning (Severiens & Dam, 2005).

Research has shown that differences are noticeable at the level of classroom interaction. For instance, male students tend to dominate certain classroom interaction tasks whereas female students participate more in teacher-student interaction. In this respect, Mahmud (2010) listed some characteristics of female students such as shyness, nervousness, uncertainty which in turn have an influence on their language proficiency.

In terms of gender differences in language skills, other studies found that women prefer writing as the skill to express their ideas whereas for men, speaking is more enjoyable. Moreover, females read more and have more positive attitudes towards reading. On the other hand, other studies found that females speak without any interruption with so many verbs, adjectives,

coordinators, whereas males make so many interruptions during their speech and sometimes their pronunciation and grammar are wrong.

In fact, language learning strategies are among the variables that affect FL learning in a variety of ways. (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1989, 2003). The word strategies originates from the Greek term "strategia" referring to the "art of war". Language learning strategies are defined as "the steps taken by students to enhance their own learning" Oxford (1990:1). In this respect, she describes them as "tools for active, self-directed involvement" (Ibid). Moreover, Hakan et al. (2015) claim that language learning strategies have an explicit effect of students' academic achievements and the improvement of language proficiency.

Recently, language learning strategies have shifted to focus on the learners and the learning process instead of focusing on the teacher and the teaching process. Such shifts have led to the need for conducting more studies to identify how learners learn and the strategies employed by them to enhance their literacy.

Learning strategies may be described as the processes that learners go through consciously to enhance the storage, retention, manipulation and application of knowledge in the language learning process. As shown in the figure below: Oxford has classified learning strategies into direct and indirect strategies direct strategies consist of memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies whereas indirect strategies consist of metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies.

A study was conducted by Puteh, Zin, & Ismail (2016), confirmed that gender differences need to be given attention since they are assumed to influence the choices of those learning strategies. This fact shows that gender issues hold important roles in learning. As a result, it has an impact on communication strategies of learners along with other variables such as ethnicity, age, cultural background, etc.

3. Significance of the Study

Since men and women are biologically different, they use language differently and they are different in the way they proceed to learn a language. As a result, gender is considered to be a variable that should be taken into account when investigating topics related to language learning in EFL contexts. Thus, the target of this paper is to know whether female and male students apply different learning strategies and to see whether the choices of those learning strategies are affected by gender differences. Moreover, the study attempts to determine gender-specific differences in the use of language learning strategies among EFL undergraduate students at Djillali Liabes University and highlight the impact of such differences on learning achievements.

4. Research Questions

1- Do male and female undergraduate students differ in language learning strategies?

2- Is gender one of the variables that affect the choices of learning strategies among undergraduate students?

3- What are the main differences between male and female undergraduate students' learning strategies?

5. Research Hypotheses

On the basis of these research questions, the following research hypotheses have been formulated:

1. Male and female undergraduate students differ in language learning strategies to a great extent?

2. Gender may be one of the variables that affect the choices of learning strategies among undergraduate students?

3. The main apparent differences between male and female undergraduate students in learning strategies are related to the choice of the learning strategy to be used.

6. Sampling

The target population consists of 80 undergraduate EFL students from Djillali Liabes University. (40 males and 40 females) who were selected randomly following what is called probability sampling. The average age level of the participants ranges from 18 to 22.

7. Data collection Instruments

This research is based on quantitative means of data collection. The aim is to quantify the issue being investigated and measure its extent. For instance, a questionnaire has been used to highlight gender-specific differences in learning strategies among EFL undergraduate male and female students at Djilali Liabes University. The questionnaire has been piloted first with 10 participants for the sake of making improvement and being able to construct the final version. This phase of piloting resulted in deleting redundant questions and other ones that were not understood by the participants as to facilitate the process of data collection. The questionnaire is composed of 12 questions that vary in nature (open-ended, multiple-choice and close-ended questions) that all attempt to shed light on the aforementioned topic.

8. Data Analysis

Respondents were given some strategies adopted from the list given by Oxford (1990) "Strategy Inventory for Language Learning". They were asked to rate the extent to which they use such strategies in their learning process. It is worth noting that two statements have been chosen from each strategy.

Memory strategies

How often do you use the following learning strategies?

1. I connect the sound of a new word and an image of the word to help remember the word

2. I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, board or on a street sign

It could be seen that a total of 22.5% represented male respondents who claimed that they had never attempted to link the sound of a new word with its image to help remember the word. 5% claimed that they often do that while the rest (2.5%) claimed that they always use this strategy. As far as the second memory strategy is concerned, a great proportion of male students (57.5%) claimed that they rarely try to remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, board or on a street sign while only few participants (5%) of the population of male students declared that they always use this strategy.

On the other hand, females seemed to use memory strategies more than males. For instance, 37.5% of the participants claimed that they always use the first memory strategy whereas only few participants (2.5%) claimed that they rarely use it in their learning process. Nearly the same results were obtained when asking females about the second strategy resulting in a large number of respondents who often use it as a learning strategy. For more statistical details, see the following table:

Table.1 Male and Female Respondents' Use of Memory Strategies

Gender	Learning strategy	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Males	Strategy1	22.5%	45%	25%	5%	2.5%
	Strategy2	10%	57.5%	25%	2.5%	5%
Females	Strategy1	5%	2.5%	25%	37.5%	30%
	Strategy2	7.5%	5%	30%	32.5%	25%

Cognitive strategies

How often do you use the following learning strategies?

1. I write notes, messages, letters or reports in English
2. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English

Responses to this question showed that a great proportion of male participants rarely write notes, messages, letters or reports in English with a percentage of (47.5%) whereas only 10% asserted that they always use this strategy. The findings also revealed that a great number of participants (37.5%)

rarely make summaries of information that they hear or read in English, and only few male participants (7.5%) claimed that they always use this strategy in their learning process.

Out of the whole number of female respondents, most of them (40%) declared that they often write notes, messages, letters or reports in English, whereas only few of them (2.5%) claimed that they had never used this strategy. Moreover, 27.5% out of the whole number of female participants declared that they always make summaries of information that they hear or read in English. However, only few participants (2.5%) announced that they had never used such strategy. For more clarification, see the following table:

Table.2 Male and Female Respondents' Use of Cognitive Strategies

Gender	Learning strategy	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Males	Strategy1	20%	47.5%	7.5%	15%	10%
	Strategy2	27.5%	37.15%	10%	17.5%	7.5%
Females	Strategy1	5%	2.5%	22.5%	40%	30%
	Strategy2	2.5%	7.5%	17.5%	45%	27.5%

Compensation Strategies

How often do you use the following learning strategies?

1. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures
2. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English

When asked about the use of compensation strategies, statistics indicated that a great proportion of male students are users of such kind of strategies in their learning process to a great extent compared to females. For instance, a total of 37.% declared that they often use gestures when being unable to think of a word during a conversation in English while 25% announced that they always use this strategy. Moreover, asking males about the second compensation strategy resulted in a total of 32.5% claiming that they always attempt to make up new words when failing to know the right ones in English.

On the other hand, females' responses showed that they do not frequently use such strategies in their learning process. In fact, a total of 32.5% asserted that they never use gestures in a conversation in English, whereas 22.5%

claimed that they rarely make up new words when failing to know the right ones in English. For more details, see the following table:

Table.3 Male and Female Respondents' Use of Compensation Strategies

Gender	Learning strategy	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Males	Strategy1	15%	10%	12.5%	37.5%	25%
	Strategy2	10%	12.5%	15%	30%	32.5%
Females	Strategy1	32.5%	20%	20%	15%	12.5%
	Strategy2	27.5%	22.5%	17.5%	12.5%	20%

Metacognitive Strategies

How often do you use the following learning strategies?

1. I pay attention when someone is speaking English
2. I think about any progress in learning English

Investigating the use of metacognitive strategies among male and female students revealed that they both use such strategies in their learning process. For instance, 50% of male respondents claimed that they often pay attention when someone is speaking English whereas 55% of female respondents do that. Furthermore, a total of 45% of male respondents announced that they often think about any progress in learning English whereas 45.5% of female respondents declared that they often use this strategy. For more numerical details, see the table below:

Table.4 Male and Female Respondents' Use of Metacognitive Strategies

Gender	Learning strategy	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Males	Strategy1	5%	7.5%	12.5%	50%	25%
	Strategy2	5%	10%	10%	45%	30%
Females	Strategy1	2.5%	10%	12.5%	55%	20%
	Strategy2	7.5%	12.5%	5%	47.5%	27.5%

Affective Strategies

How often do you use the following learning strategies?

1. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English
2. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake

Responses to this question showed that a great proportion of male participants (37.5%) rarely attempt to relax when being afraid of using English. Moreover, a total of 45% of male respondents claimed that they rarely encourage themselves to speak English when being afraid of making a mistake. As far as females' responses are concerned, the findings revealed that most female respondents are users of affective strategies. For instance, a total of 45% of females asserted that they always try to relax when being afraid of using the target languages, whereas a total of 50% confirmed that they always encourage themselves to speak English even when being afraid of making a mistake. For more clarification, see the following table:

Table.5 Male and Female Respondents' Use of Affective Strategies

Gender	Learning strategy	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Males	Strategy1	37.5%	37.5%	5%	12.5%	7.5%
	Strategy2	30%	45%	7.5%	5%	12.5%
Females	Strategy1	5%	7.5%	12.5%	30%	45%
	Strategy2	5%	5%	10%	30%	50%

Social Strategies

How often do you use the following learning strategies?

1. If I don't understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again
2. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers

Asking male and female respondents about the use of what is referred to as social strategies indicated that most male speakers are users of such strategies in their learning process. Indeed, the obtained findings showed that a total of 45% of male respondents always ask the speaker to slow down or say the English word again when being unable to understand its meaning whereas 37.5% of female participants announced that they have never used this strategy.

Moreover, 50% of male respondents declared that they always try to learn about the culture of English speakers. On the other hand, only 5% of female participants announced that they often use this learning strategy. See the table below:

Table.6 Male and Female Respondents' Use of Social Strategies

Gender	Learning strategy	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Males	Strategy1	5%	7.5%	12.5%	30%	45%
	Strategy2	5%	5%	10%	30%	50%
Females	Strategy1	37.5%	37.5%	5%	12.5%	7.5%
	Strategy2	30%	45%	7.5%	5%	12.5%

9. Discussion of the Findings

The aim of this research work is to examine the differences in vocabulary between male and female learners' use of learning strategies. It is worth mentioning that the study aims also to highlight the factors that contribute to such gender-specific differences. Based on the aforementioned results, it could be noticed that there is a wide apparent difference between males and females in terms of the use of language learning strategies.

Moreover, gender may be one of the variables that affect the choices of learning strategies among the participants. It could be seen also that the main apparent differences between male and female undergraduate students in learning strategies are related to the choice of the learning strategy to be used. Thus, the suggested hypotheses had been confirmed as follows:

1. Male and female undergraduate students differ in language learning strategies to a great extent?
2. Gender may be one of the variables that affect the choices of learning strategies among undergraduate students?
3. The main apparent differences between male and female undergraduate students in learning strategies are related to the choice of the learning strategy to be used.

It could be noticed that memory and cognitive strategies are widely used by undergraduate female participants, compensation strategies are widely used among male respondents, metacognitive strategies are used equally by male

and female respondents, affective strategies are widely used by females, whereas social strategies are well manipulated by male students.

10. Conclusion

Male and female students differ in language use to some extent. The findings also show that such differences between male and female students are due to some biological as well as socio-cultural factors. Therefore, language learners need to know, master, and be aware of the language learning strategies that are mostly appropriate to be used.

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