

## The Influence of the Gender Factor to the Learning Styles of Secondary Students in the Process of Language Learning

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**Abstract.** The paper concludes investigations of the different aspects of the theory of learning styles connected with the gender factor. There are a number of definitions of learning styles, the theoretical study of gender differences in different aspects of the learning process and its connection with the learning styles of secondary students.

The author of the present article investigates gender differences in patterns of knowledge in the process of language learning.

The distinction between “sex” and “gender” is a frequent topic for debates within feminist research and epistemology. A common use of the term “sex” is to restrict it to referring to biological distinctions between males and females, while reserving the term “gender” to refer to the psychological features or attributes associated with these categories (Deaux, 1985). The use of gender is more accurate for the connection to “the gender system” identified by feminist researchers, since it marks the cultural and structural dimension. The most studies are concerned with gender differences in classroom interaction. This problem is of obvious scientific and pedagogical interest since one goal for education is to provide equal opportunities for males and females.

The necessity of research on gender differences in the process of learning the language is obvious nowadays. The societal needs, peoples’ belief system, the power of large-scale studies, the pedagogical need to understand educational performance and measures, the feminist need, have framed the importance of the matter to many researchers in this field.

And one of the major problems in the field is the limited number of female researchers. From educational point of view, the less a problem is understood or the more complex the problem is, the harder it is to act upon gender differences and learning styles.

### Introduction

Educational interest in language is not new. Studies of rhetoric and grammar go back as far as the Greeks; in different countries, studies of the classical languages, and more recently of English, have had a well-established place in educational practice.

Many questions are connected with the theme of the present paper; for example, both about the nature of language as an aspect of human experience, and about language as a resource of fundamental importance in the building of human experience.

**The aim** of the present research is to investigate the influence of the *Gender* Factor to the learning styles of the secondary students in the process of language learning.

**The object** of the research is the gender-based secondary students’ learning style.

**The method** of the research is the analysis of the theoretical pedagogical, psychological, sociological literature.

**Key-words:** gender, pattern of knowledge, differences, preference, learning styles, success.

According to many researchers, such as Barnes (1996), Bernstein (1993), Christie (1985) and others, the tendency in much of the western intellectual tradition has been to

dissociate language and experience, in such a way that language is seen as rather neutral, merely serving to carry the fruits of experience.

But the opposite point of view (Mathiot, 1997; Oakley, 1992; Plum, 1994) argues that language is itself not only a part of experience, but intimately involved in the manner in which we construct and organize experience. As such, it is never neutral, but deeply implicated in building meaning.

There are many discussions about language, teaching and language learning.

Some of researchers (Plum, 1994; Archer & Lloid, 1982) believe that language is a political institution: and those who are wise in its ways, capable of using it to shape and serve important personal and social goals, will be the ones who are able not merely to participate effectively *in* the world, but able also *to act upon it*, in the sense that they can strive for significant social change.

The author of the present paper claims that one of the most interesting and mysterious questions for different discussions is the question about language and gender, how these two notions are bound up with each other.

**This problem is not investigated in Latvia**, but some Latvian researchers as Meikshane & Plotnieks (1982); Karpova (1995, 1998); Kraukle & Krauklis (1997);

Meikshane (1965, 1998); Plotnieks (1982) made a valuable contribution to different pedagogical and psychological aspects of this question.

The main question each reader can ask is: “What is the difference between **sex** and **gender**?” According to Oakley (1992), Archer & Lloyd (1982):

- **sex**: identification as female or male (*biological*);
- **gender**: identification as feminine or masculine (*social*).

And we have to be aware that if gender is a social phenomenon one should be able to find linguistic evidence of it, since language is the primary means by which we create the categories which help us in our life.

Such evidence is indeed to be found: from the different treatment by parents of newborn babies, depending on sex; through the messages that women and women’s activities are marginal (Hallberg, 1992), through the social approval of the writing of little girls at school who write almost exclusively about home and family, elves and fairies, and talking animals while their male classmates get on with the business of finding out how the world outside school and family works and produce what stories they write with the twin focuses of power and violence; through TV, films, and books; to the categories taken for granted in everyday conversation.

Investigations of gender differences in learning styles and language skills have a long history. The author of the present paper supports the point of view of Wernersson (1989), who concludes that most studies are concerned with gender differences in classroom interaction.

Studies of the development of language and skills during the school years have so far provided very little information that helps to explain the pattern of horizontal or vertical division between males and females in secondary education. This problem is of obvious pedagogical interest since one goal for education is to provide equal opportunities for males and females (Lpo, 1994: 4):

“The school has an important task to bring about and anchor in the pupils the values that our society rests upon. The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all humans, equality between women and men and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are those values the school shall form and bring about.”

Gender aspects of cognitive performance is one important part of this goal. There is always a need for information regarding reasons why differences emerge and develop, and what the consequences may be in a long perspective. Education is one important strategy for women to reach the same status as men.

According to Florin & Johansson (1993), “Knowledge is power, and equal levels of competence should remove any legitimate argument for female subordination. The maintenance of female subordination may be understood by the two principles:

- the rule of distinctive separation of the two sexes, and
- the rule of the “male norm”.

The later principle is also referred to as the “hegemonic masculinity” principle (Connel, 1987), which states that a higher value is automatically assigned to things masculine (Hirdman, 1988).

Patterns of gender differences are deeply rooted in public media as well as in peoples’ belief system. The privileged position of men *on the structural level* partly explains why many old beliefs about female and male “nature” appear so frequently in both media and in private conversations. Many of the beliefs reflected address notions of gender differences in cognitive abilities, proficiencies and achievements.

For example, Francis Galton who first claimed empirical scientific ground for the conclusion that women tend in all their capacities to be inferior to men (Galton, 1907, referred in Shields, 1975). One of many examples from Shields illustrates the logic of that time: “That men should have greater cerebral variability and therefore more originality, while women have greater stability and therefore more ‘common sense’, are facts both consistent with the general theory of sex and verifiable in common experience.” (Shields, 1975: 743)

Females, who were seen as the opposite of males by default, were seen more restricted or even invariable intellectually: “Women is a rule, typical, man, individual. The former has average, the latter exceptional features... there is incomparably less variation between women than men. If you know one, you know them all, with but few exceptions.” (Dijkstra, 1986: 129)

There are two major reasons for my interest of patterns of language and gender.

The first is for the societal and educational reasons mentioned above. The second is the lack of women working within this field. There are several reasons why women are lacking in mainstream educational research, and particularly so in the field of educational measurement.

It was early acknowledged that this field had numerous misinterpretations and prejudices against women (Shields, 1975); Rossiter, 1982), and it was and still is a well-established male research area.

According to Hallberg (1992), the common basis for the feminist critique against traditional science, is the presumption that the male/masculine has an important impact on both form and content of research.

Gender differences are often given biological explanations which sometimes refer to previously abandoned theories (as for example “man-the hunter and woman-the gatherer”).

As for the author of this paper, it seems particularly important to contrast such ideas with well-founded results and illustrations of how socially constructed the reality is. The question seems, however, always to be present when gender differences are in focus.

And let’s return to the title of the present paper; learning styles and gender differences, how they are connected with the language. We can define *learning style* as the way in which *each* learner begins to concentrate on, process, and retain new and difficult information DeBello (1990: 2).

According to many researchers, Elliot (1991); Gadwa & Griggs (1995); Ebel (1999); Price (1980); Milgram (1993), the author of this paper can conclude, that the learners are affected by 21 elements or variables that are significantly differentiated among students. Such researchers as Restak (1979) and Thies (1979) believe that *three fifths of the learning style is biologically imposed*.

Learning styles vary with:

- **age** (Griggs, 1991; Price, 1980),
- **global versus analytic brain processing** (Ebel, 1999)
- **achievement level** (Milgram & Price, 1993);
- **gender** (Cavanaugh, 1982); Greb 1999); Pizzo, 1990);
- **culture** (Griggs, 1991; Milgram & Price, 1993; Bruno, 1990; Cavanaugh, 1982).

### Differences by Age

Learning styles change as individuals grow older (Griggs, 1991; Price, 1980). Students' learning styles change between elementary and middle school and between middle school and high school. They continue to change in college and during adulthood, and the styles of older adults in the 65-85 year-old range differ in many ways from those of younger people. Nevertheless, individuals change in unique ways. Some people hardly change their learning style but others experience rapid and multiple changes.

### Differences by Processing Styles

Individuals differ in how they absorb and process new and difficult information. Investigations of the variables of global and analytic and left- or right-preferenced processing revealed that:

- relationships exist among these cognitive dimensions and many students' environmental, emotional, sociological, and physiological learning-style traits;
- these cognitive dimensions and specific learning-style traits often cluster together.

Cody (1983); Cavanaugh (1982)

Many experimental studies have been conducted to determine the effects of specific sequential versus simultaneous instructional approaches on identified analytic and global students - Cavanaugh (1982); Bruno (1990).

Early researchers found that analytic students who were taught analytically and global students who were taught globally achieved statistically higher achievement test scores with complementary, rather than with dissonant instructional strategies.

### Differences by Achievement

Individuals' learning styles differ based on their high versus low academic achievement.

Gifted and underachieving students have significantly different learning styles and do not perform well with the same methods. Conversely, gifted students in nine diverse cultures with talents in either athletics, art, dance, leadership, literature, languages, or music evidenced essentially similar learning style characteristics to other students with the same talent (Milgram & Price, 1993: 7).

### Differences by Gender

Individuals differ by gender (Greb, 1999; Pizzo, 1990). Males and females learn differently from each other. Males tend to be more kinesthetic, tactual, and visual, and need more mobility in a more informal environment than females.

Males also are more nonconforming and peer motivated than their female classmates. In group, males tend to learn less by listening. Females, more than males, tend to be auditory, authority-oriented, and better able to sit passively at conventional classroom desks and chairs than males. Females also tend to:

- need significantly more quiet while learning (Pizzo, 1990: 11);
- be more self- and adult -motivated, and conforming than males (Marcus, 1977: 9).

The author of this paper would like to pay the readers' attention to the interesting research of Thompson (1975), who claims that there are fundamental differences between males' and females' ways of *communicating*, which she terms "genderlects", as a takeoff on language dialects. She believes that a male's world focuses on competition, status, and independence. But, a female's world focuses on intimacy, consensus, sometimes independence.

According to Thompson (1975), boys learn to compete in hierarchical groups, while girls learn to cooperate in small groups in which mutual liking is important.

Studies by Leet-Pellegrini (1980), Aries (1976), and Fox (1990) suggest that males feel comfortable in a lecturing role, which is a demonstration of expertise, and status, but females feel comfortable in a listening role, which shows a desire to cooperate, bond and be liked; by-products of a world of connections, not status. Females feel more comfortable sharing their expertise with others, rather than rivaling others with it.

We as teachers of English know that one of the important parts of learning the language is decision making, and in this area again we can see contrasting worlds. Ong (1989) suggests that the male world is based on "adversativeness", in contrast, females are encouraged to keep the peace.

Females see the orders that males give as unnecessarily provocative, challenging, and aggressive, while males see the suggestions that females make as infuriating and bossy. Males appear to want females to act like males, and females want males to act like females.

During the problem solving, which we often face at the English lessons, there are clear differences between boys and girls (Dorval, 1990).

As far as body language was concerned, boys sat at angles to each other and their gaze was not anchored on the other's face, while the girls sat close together and their gaze was anchored on the other's face.

As far as the conversation was concerned, the boys produced a mass of short spurts of speech. There was much teasing, which Leaper (1988) terms "negative reciprocity",

and much defiance, meanwhile, the girls produced big blocks of talk and were obedient, and there was much attentive listening and sympathizing.

The author of this paper shares the point of view of Bress (2000), who believes that; “The style of dealing with problems continues into adulthood. Men downplay or dismiss the problems of other men, or they change the subject. They do this to try to minimize the problem.

In contrast, women listen to and confront problems, and reinforce other women. The two approaches are poles apart, but they both serve to maintain friendships within a certain rule system” (Bress, 2000: 27).

Particular interest in educational outcomes has been paid to gender differences in reading, since reading plays a significant role in achieving educational and vocational outcomes and in promoting the individual’s ability to function in society. The author of this paper would like to pay the reader’s attention to the interesting research of Rosen (1995), who has investigated the gender differences in reading performance at the English lessons.

There are three text types in reading proficiency (Elley, 1994; Rosen, 1995):

- “*Expository prose*”, refers to continuous text materials designed to describe or explain something.
- “*Narrative prose*”, refers to continuous text materials in which the writer’s aim is to tell a story, whether fact or fiction.
- So called “*Documents*”, a text type which requires the students to process information organized in matrix formats, such as maps, tables, charts, graphs, diagrams, sets of instructions.

According to Rosen (1995: 4), a consistent female advantage was found on Expository and Narrative item types, whereas gender differences in performance on Document tasks tended to be either smaller or shift direction.

The author of the present paper shares the point of view of Elley (1994), Gustafsson & Undheim (1996), who believe, that the approach of the gender differences in Document reading adopted relies on a psychometric theory of cognitive abilities according to which, differences in performance on any cognitive task are caused by differences in *several* underlying abilities and contextual dimensions, which in turn have *various degrees of generality*. The theory is supported by a vast amount of empirical evidence (Carroll, 1993).

According to Halpern (1992), one reason why female do not have so much advantage on Documents as they do on Narrative and Expository, in the study of English, may well be due to the fact that Document tasks beside written words, often involve numerical and spatial content on which certain types of content, males excel at.

Another possibility is that the performance is affected by the actual topic/subject in each Document task.

Reading belongs essentially to the verbal domain, even though in practice reading is a key skill in almost any

cognitive task. In the tradition of the research on cognitive abilities, reading proficiency has not been interpreted as one single ability, but rather as a reflection of several underlying cognitive abilities depending on the nature of the reading material used for the language study.

Skills underlying performance on various types of texts may be connected to the domain of individual differences in cognitive abilities.

Today, the leading theoretical model of cognitive abilities relies on an empirically well established hierarchical model with three levels (Carroll, 1993; Gustafsson & Undheim, 1996).

On the top of this model, there is *general intelligence*, influencing all cognitive performances, on the intermediate level several broad dimensions are defined, such as *crystallized intelligence*, which is, mainly a generalized verbal ability or *general visualization*, which is a broad spatial ability.

On the next level a large number of narrow ability dimensions have been identified, influencing rather specific cognitive tasks.

The author of the present paper believes that reading Documents may be a rather complex task as compared to conventional reading of texts, because it requires several skills in addition to printed word recognition. Documents may require the reader to handle spatial layouts in order to locate specific information.

The visual search in Documents may be more demanding on attention perceptual skills, further more Documents require the reader to follow directions. Some may require the reader to relate different pieces of information to each other in order to integrate and compare.

Documents also often involve the requirement of processing numbers. For some students, numbers have a strong negative emotional loading. This may be more so for females than for males, and it may affect their performance.

According to Thompson (1975), boys are slower at learning to read in English, but by the age of 10 the female advantage has disappeared.

Contradictory results were reported by Gates (1961), where gender differences in reading achievement were found favouring females.

Gates found a female advantage on three measures of reading:

- speed,
- reading vocabulary,
- level of comprehension

in a large study of more than 13000 students in grades 2 through 8 (age 8 through 14).

Gender differences in the latest Reading Literacy study have been investigated in several studies (Elley, 1994; Taube & Munck, 1996; Wagemaker, 1996).

Wagemaker (1996) found a consistent pattern of females performing better than males at both age levels (9- and 14-year-olds), but with the differences tending to diminish in adolescence, however, on Document passages males were found to be favoured in both high-achieved and low-achieving countries, with the differences tending to favour boys even more through time.

Taube & Munck (1996) reported gender differences as a function of themes for text tasks. A rather consistent pattern was found, with both 8-year-old and 14-year-old females achieving better on most tests, but particularly so on narrative texts, where the theme was about human beings, animals acting as human being and human activities.

The study supported the hypothesis that the topic addressed in the reading task may be of importance for achievement as well as for the understanding of gender differences.

Cultural, social and biological hypotheses are put forward for explaining patterns of gender differences within the cognitive domain. Perhaps tests of reading, to a large degree, indicate habits of reading, although the relation between reading habits and reading proficiency is ambiguous. Reading in terms of voluntary reading may be considered as a typical female habit in many countries, at least during adolescence. Guthrie and Greaney (1991) reported that most surveys show that females enjoy reading more than boys do, and that they read more often.

## Conclusion

The author of the present paper can conclude that gender differences in reading and other language skills were found in many countries.

Gender differences in Document reading skills, according to many researchers, is mainly a reflection of cultural influences.

Females were more successful than males in eight countries among 9-year-olds. A somewhat different pattern was found among the 14-year-olds, where six countries showed a male advantage and five a female advantage.

We can see that the so-called *Gender Factor* plays a very important role in Document reading skills and in common in the process of language learning. One should not only interpret the *Gender* factor as a reflection of Document reading proficiency.

There are good reasons to believe that *Gender* reflects a mixture involving other dimensions as well, like dimensions of general reading, reasoning, numeral, spatial and verbal abilities, and cultural influences.

And further analysis of gender differences in the process of learning and in the document domain of reading literacy is of great interest for many educators and researchers.

All the educators must take into account the learning styles of the students and their gender differences in the process of learning.

The more we know our students, their learning styles, their gender differences, and their learning needs, the more successful achievements they will reach in their study.

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### **Lyties faktoriaus įtaka mokymosi stiliams mokantis kalbų vidurinėje mokykloje**

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje yra apibendrinami mokymosi stilių teorijos skirtingų aspektų tyrinėjimai priklausomai nuo lyties/giminės faktoriaus. Yra daug skirtingų mokymosi stilių, lyčių skirtumų teorinių tyrimų skirtingais mokymosi proceso aspektais, bei jų ryšio su skirtingais mokymosi stiliais vidurinėje mokykloje apibrėžimų.

Šio straipsnio autorė tyrinėja lyties įtaką įsisavinant žinias kalbų mokymosi procese. Daugelis tyrimų remiasi lyties skirtumais klasės veikloje (bendravime). Problema yra aktuali tiek mokslinių, tiek pedagoginių požiūriais, nes lavinimo tikslas yra suteikti vienodas galimybes tiek vyrams, tiek moterims.

Lyčių skirtumo tyrimo kalbų mokymosi procese būtinumas yra akivaizdus šiuolaikinėje visuomenėje. Tačiau viena pagrindinių problemų šioje srityje yra ribotas moterų mokslininkų (tyrinėtojų) skaičius.

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