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Gender Differences in Language Acquisition and Learning

The present article was selected by me for inclusion in this volume as it discusses the issues connected with gender differences in language acquisition and learning that have been the major concern of my academic research over the past years. The article presents an overview of well-known studies on gender as well as those not generally known. I also report in this article on my contribution to this area of research on language acquisition. The issue of gender is discussed here from psycholinguistic, neurolinguistic and sociolinguistic perspectives.

1. Introduction

There is a lot of evidence showing that females outperform males in various language skills, in different aspects of language use, in foreign language learning and second language acquisition. In this chapter we would like to present traditional views on the subject and confront them with the new opinions and methods concerning research, as well as studies on gender differences in language acquisition and language learning.

The studies on language and gender are conducted from the following three perspectives:

- I. how is gender represented in language?
- II. what are the differences between the language of males and females and what language is used when we address men and what language is used when addressing women?
- III. what are the differences in language aptitude between males and females; who acquires first language and learns foreign language better and faster?

Representation of gender in a given language reflects the traditional attitudes of its speakers passed on from generation to generation. In every language males are represented in a more positive way than females (KARWATOWSKA, SZPYRA-KOZŁOWSKA, 2005: 14). In Polish, e.g. most words for positions or professions have only masculine forms like *szofer*, *górnik*, *dziekan*. In English similarly *congressman*, and many other names with the morpheme *-man* do not have feminine counter-

parts. There is of course a new tendency to coin neuter counterparts in English, e.g. *chairperson* (instead of *chairman*), and feminine ones in Polish, e.g. *ministra* for a lady minister.

Certain occupations or features are associated with a given gender. In Polish *męski* has a positive meaning — *męski charakter*, *męska decyzja* — and the adjective denoting female provides negative connotations: *babskie gadanie*, *babska ciekawość*; *chłopski rozum* but *babska logika*. In English, as in Polish, certain professions or positions are associated with a given gender. *Professor* and *doctor* with a man, and *singer* with a woman. *Killer*, *robber*, *criminal*, and *jerk* are associated with men. *Genius* is always masculine.

Our concern here is II and III (above). We are going to present the results of studies concerning the differences between language of males and females and then discuss those differences in the context of acquisition and learning. This presentation includes the findings of our earlier publications (ARABSKI 1999, 2009, 2012).

2. Gender versus language use

2.1. Defining gender

Gender is understood here as a social construct, something we learn throughout our whole life. People are not strictly masculine or feminine; in fact we are a combination of many characteristics that could be considered as either, or both, masculine and feminine. Gender is not something we are, but something we do. Sex, by contrast, is biologically based and is related to genes, hormones and anatomy.

2.2. Differences between female and male language (an overview of studies)

Females are traditionally known to use different language than males. The cognitive differences between males and females and different social roles which they have played result in their verbal abilities and the language they use. Language and gender studies can be traced back to the 1920s when the first piece in linguistics regarding “women’s language” was published by Otto Jespersen. He described women’s vocabulary as less extensive, and attributed more genius and greater variability to men. According to him females’ speech was just a deviant form of the average male speaking patterns. In other words, women’s speech was held to be deficient when compared with the male “norm.” His claims are undoubtedly grounded in the prevailing gender ideologies of his time.

A new approach and opinions are represented by LAKOFF (1973) who also considered women's speech as weak in comparison with men. She argued that gender inequity in women's use of language stemmed not from inherent biological or mental deficiency but rather from their marginalization in society. In other words, females' language was deficient because their position in society was so.

According to Lakoff, females

- Hedge: using phrases like “sort of,” “kind of,” “it seems like,” etc.
- Use (super)polite forms: “Would you mind...,” “I'd appreciate it if...,” “...if you don't mind.”
- Use tag questions: “You're going to dinner, aren't you?”
- Speak in italics: using intonational emphasis equal to underlining words — *so*, *very*, *quite*.
- Use empty adjectives: *divine*, *lovely*, *adorable*, etc.
- Use hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation, English prestige grammar and clear enunciation.
- Use direct quotation: men paraphrase more often.
- Have a special lexicon: women use more words for things like colours, men for sports.
- Use question intonation in declarative statements: women make declarative statements into questions by raising the pitch of their voice at the end of a statement, expressing uncertainty.
- Use “wh-” imperatives: (such as, “Why don't you watch this film?”)
- Speak less frequently.
- Overuse qualifiers: (for example: “I think that...”)
- Apologise more: (for instance, “I'm sorry, but I think that...”)
- Use modal constructions: (such as *can*, *would*, *should*, *ought* — “Should we turn up the heat?”)
- Avoid coarse language or expletives.
- Use indirect commands and requests: (for example, “My, isn't it cold in here?” — really a request to turn the heat on or close a window)
- Use more intensifiers: especially *so* and *very* (for instance, “I'm *so* glad you came!”, “He is *very* nice!”)
- Women don't tell jokes (JENKINS, 1986; PAINTER, 1980).

COATES (1993) describes the ways in which women and men differ in their sense of what is *appropriate* for them as speakers (communicative competence). She has surveyed many works that have been done in this area and her findings are as follows (COATES, 1993: 106—140):

- In mixed sex conversations men interrupt more and use more overlaps, indicating a lack of understanding or interest. Men tend to violate turn-taking rules in conversation and try to dominate it. Silence is used by men to keep up their dominance.

- Contrary to myth, men have been shown to talk more than women in social settings. The evidence is that women and men tend to discuss different topics. Women choose topics such as children and personal relationships and men prefer to talk about sport, politics and cars.
- Women's speech is often described as "tentative" and this is linked to the claim that they use more *hedges* — linguistic forms such as *I think, I'm sure, sort of* and *perhaps*.
- Women use questions and tag-questions more often than men to keep conversation going.
- While giving directives women phrase them as proposals for joint action, e.g. *well, let's make that our plan*, while men prefer to use aggravated forms, such as imperatives.
- Men are reported to use swear words, taboo language, and non-standard grammar more often than women.
- Women give and receive more compliments than men.
- Women's speech is more collaborative than competitive in style. Men's speech shows reverse tendencies.

One of the interpretations of the differences between genders in language use is the isolation of women, who traditionally stayed at home and did not have language contacts as intensely as working men did. CHAMBERS (1995) gives a lot of examples of isolation or mobility which are responsible for variants among contiguous social groups in contemporary Western society. Mobility is responsible for language change and isolation for the preservation of traditional forms, e.g. dialects which have survived in complete isolation.

Another sociolinguistic explanation of the linguistic differences between men and women in the New York area studied by LABOV (1972: 301—4) is "a special sensitivity" represented by women. It is women who assist the language acquisition of their children most directly and who therefore are more sensitive to language use. He also claims that women of the same area speak with 'hypercorrection' (LABOV, 1966).

According to TRUDGILL (1972: 182—3):

Women in our society are more status-conscious than men, generally speaking, and are therefore more aware of the social significance of linguistic variables. There are two possible reasons for this:

- (i) The social position of women in our society is less secure than that of men, and, usually, subordinate to that of men. It may be, therefore, that is more necessary for women to secure and signal their social status linguistically and in other ways, and they may for this reason be more aware of the importance of this type of signal. (This will be particularly true of women who are not working.)

- (ii) Men in our society can be rated socially by their occupation, their earning power, and perhaps by their other abilities — in other words by what they *do*. For the most part, however, this is not possible for women. It may be, therefore, that they have instead to be rated on how they *appear*. Since they are not rated by their occupations or by their occupational success, other signals of status, including speech, are correspondingly more important.

According to CHAMBERS (1995: 133), the interpretation of hypercorrection and face-saving is that women compensate in this way for shortcomings of a social nature. The empirical evidence shows women to be better performers in the whole spectrum of sociolinguistic situations, i.e. linguistic variants and repertoire. Besides, women also show an advantage over men in fluency, speaking sentence complexity, analogy, and listening comprehension of written and spoken texts (Maccoby and JACKLIN, 1974: 75—85). This results then in their sociolinguistic superiority.

A more sophisticated typology is offered by Deborah TANNEN (1990) who presents male and female language characteristics in a series of six contrasts. These are:

- Status *vs.* support
- Independence *vs.* intimacy
- Advice *vs.* understanding
- Information *vs.* feelings
- Orders *vs.* proposals
- Conflict *vs.* compromise

Status *versus* support

Men see the world as a place where speech is used to build status. Women, in contrast, perceive the world as a network of social connections and try to find consensus rather than triumph.

Independence *versus* intimacy

Women seem to think in terms of closeness and support; they are concerned with an attempt to gain and preserve intimacy. By contrast men, who are concerned with status, tend to focus more on independence.

Advice *versus* understanding

Women seek sympathy and comfort for their problems, while men will automatically look for a solution to the problem.

Information *versus* feelings

Men's conversation is message orientated, based upon communicating information. For women, conversation is much more important for building relationships

and maintaining social links. Men seem to focus on the brevity of speech and the aspect of exchanging information, while women value sharing of emotion and commenting on feelings.

Orders versus proposals

Men prefer to hear and use direct imperatives, like *close the door, switch on the light*. Women, by contrast, prefer to use indirect and superpolite forms, for instance *let's, would you mind if...?*

Conflict versus compromise

Women are more likely to avoid fights and conflicts by refusing to oppose, even if they do not get what they expected. Men seem to be much more prepared to argue their preferences even at the risk of conflict.

The differences can be summarized as follows:

Women:

- Establish intimacy and community
- Talk too much
- Speak in private contexts
- Build relations
- Overlap
- Speak symmetrically

Men:

- Establish status and power
- Get more air time
- Speak in public
- Negotiate status/avoid failure
- Speak one at a time
- Speak asymmetrically

The large body of literature on sex differences in verbal ability conveys the opinion that females are better in this respect than males and that they outperform males in many language functions. This includes language acquisition.

2.3. Biological and cognitive gender differences in language abilities

The differences between the genders resulting in language abilities including better acquisition could also be caused by biological and cognitive differences. Females have more bilateral brains than males. This means that they use both hemispheres when undertaking certain cognitive tasks. Many studies suggest that the *corpus callosum*, the thick bundle of nerves that allows the right half of the brain to communicate with the left, is relatively larger in women than in men. If size really corresponds

to function, the better communication between the hemispheres might explain women's greater ability to read and express emotional clues. In men the functional division between the left and the right hemispheres is more clearly defined and the hemispheres are connected by a smaller number of nerves. The flow of information between the emotional side of the brain and the verbal one is possibly more restricted and men thus find it more difficult to express their emotions.

Specialists speculate that the greater communication between the two sides of the brain could impair women's performance on certain visual-spatial tasks. For example, the ability to tell directions on a map without rotating it appears to be weaker in women, whose brains try to control the process by two hemispheres, while men restrict the process to the right hemisphere.

As far as verbal fluency is concerned, women's superiority may be explained by the fact that they have a greater capacity than men to integrate information from the emotional and spatial side of the brain with that from the verbal side. Female speech appears to be enhanced by input from various cerebral regions, especially those that control vision and feelings. This greater access to the brain's imagery may help explain why girls often begin speaking earlier than boys and develop a larger vocabulary. It has to be mentioned, though, that boys often catch up with their female peers in secondary school and some of them are better at verbal tasks.

The spatial, mathematical/quantitative and linguistic categories of intellectual abilities are the three ability factors in which sex differences are most frequently reported. Baker, as noted by HALPERN (1992: 62), discusses numerous sex differences in each of the sensory systems. She documents that in hearing, for example, females are better at detecting pure tones (tones of one frequency) during childhood and later. As far as vision is concerned, males under the age of 40 have better dynamic visual acuity (ability to detect small movements in the visual field). She also mentions sex differences in taste, in touch and in perception ranging from bin-aural beats (an auditory phenomenon) to visual acuity.

HALPERN (1992: 66) reviews a number of studies done on age trends in verbal abilities. The general findings of the research done among English speaking children are as follows:

- girls produce longer utterances at younger ages
- girls produce more varied constructions, e.g. passive voice, truncated passive, participles
- girls make fewer errors in language use overall
- girls have larger vocabularies at earlier ages than boys
- girls are better in reading processes

The results of a large-scale longitudinal study done by MARTIN and HOOVER (1987) show that girls scored higher on tests of spelling, capitalisation, punctuation, language use, reference materials, and reading comprehension.

The established opinion that females outperform males in language functions was criticized as early as in 1974 by Maccoby and Jacklin. They found that the

“classic” studies of child language development which demonstrated sex difference in language development in the first years of life were based on very small samples, where differences would not even reach statistical significance in large samples. They concluded, on the basis of a large number of studies on pre-school children that had been conducted up to the time of their review, that no consistently significant sex differences in linguistic abilities were found in children of that age.

Research on children in their early school years through to early adolescence was, according to MACCOBY and JACKLIN (1974), more easily reviewed, because studies used larger samples and more standardized measures of language ability. The conclusion they reached with regard to that literature was that there was no evidence of sex difference in verbal ability until about age 10 or 11.

They concluded:

for large unselected populations the situation seems to be one of very little sex differences in verbal skill from about 3 to 11, with a new phase of differentiation occurring at adolescence (MACCOBY and JACKLIN 1974: 85).

This view was then supported by HALPERN (1986: 47):

Although verbal sex differences favouring girls in early childhood may be somewhat tenuous, they emerge clearly at adolescence and continue into old age.

2.4. Sound production differences between male and female speakers

Language abilities which are natural, untrained and without any educational bias are presented in our study on differences between young, eight-year-old males and females in foreign sounds production (ARABSKI 2009). The subjects were 40 eight-year-old primary school pupils (20 girls and 20 boys), native speakers of Polish, who were asked to repeat after hearing the following items recorded by an American native speaker (Table 1).

Table 1. Tested items

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
pat	rib	gate	teethe	Today	bat	dip	Kate	tang	thane
11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Ridge	baths	mesh	shot	Veal	Cloth	cause	dove	tip tip	mug mug

The aim of the study was to find out about the differences between young pre-pubescent males and females in foreign sound production. All the subjects had been exposed to English for about five months before the recordings. They took English as their first grade curriculum subject with the same teachers and the same amount of instruction time — two hours a week.

We were expecting the following pronunciation problems in the above 20 items:

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 1. pat | aspiration, — |
| 2. rib | r, final voiced /β/ |
| 3. gate | minimal pair with <u>Kate</u> |
| 4. teethe | aspiration, final voiced /?/ |
| 5. to-day | /ʒ/ |
| 6. bat | /— /, minimal pair with <u>pat</u> |
| 7. dip | minimal pair with <u>tip</u> |
| 8. Kate | aspiration |
| 9. tang | aspiration, |
| 10. thane | initial > |
| 11. ridge | r, final palatalized /}/ |
| 12. baths | final />s/ |
| 13. mesh | final palatalized /♣/ |
| 14. shot | initial palatalized /♣/ |
| 15. veal | final /l/ |
| 16. cloth | final > |
| 17. cause | aspiration |
| 18. dove | final voiced /v/ |
| 19. tip | |
| tip | intonation (rising) |
| 20. mug | |
| mug | final voiced /g/, intonation (falling) |

The number of correct repetitions is given in the following table. Aspiration was measured by Praat 4.6.18 speech-analysis programme and the results of the analysis are presented after the following table. (Table 2 and Table 3).

The results of the study show that the differences between genders in the investigated skill are almost non-existent (2%). It seems that the eight-year-olds have not yet acquired the language roles characteristic of mature males and females. They have not acquired any strategies to deal with the language input they are exposed to. The differences between genders may not exist at that age yet.

Table 2. Number of correct repetitions (productions)

Number of repetitions	Tested items	Males	Females
— 60	(1) pat	6	7
	(2) bat	6	4
	(9) tang	4	6
		16	17
§ — 20	(5) to-day	15	16
r — 40	(2) rib	5	3
	(11) ridge	4	1
		9	4
— 20	(9) tang	6	10
Final voiced — 100	(2) rib	11	12
	(4) teeth	2	4
	(17) cause	4	6
	(18) dove	4	4
	(20) mug	7	6
		28	32
Palatalization — 60	(11) ridge	4	3
	(13) mesh	7	6
	(14) shot	8	11
		19	21
Initial > — 20	(10) thane	2	6
Final />s/ — 20	(12) baths	4	6
Final /l/ — 20	(15) veal	∅	2
Rising intonation — 20	(19) tip tip	19	17
Falling intonation — 20	(20) mug mug	18	12

Table 3. Percent of correct repetitions

Repetition	Number	Percent
Males	136	34
Females	143	36
Razem	400	100

2.5. Sociolinguistic perspective on gender differences in language use

The next group of objections concerning the opinion that females outperform males in language functions comes from sociolinguists. It concerns THE ENVIRONMENT of second language acquisition and foreign language learning. According to EHRlich (2001), who presents a historical overview of research that has investigated the relationship between gender and second language acquisition:

Such research ... has not acknowledged the complexity of gender as a social construct and thus has simplified and overgeneralized the relationship between gender and language acquisition.

She illustrates her claim by the ethnographic study (SIEGEL, 1994) of four white Western women in Japan, learners of Japanese who improperly used honorifics and sentence-final pragmatic particles associated with Japanese women's language. The reason was "their resistance to adopting what they perceive as an overly humble, overly silly Japanese feminine identity."

While linguistic simplification is a universal property of learners' interlanguages, the particular kind of linguistic simplification displayed by these female learners of Japanese resulted from their distaste for Japanese constructions of femininity as manifested in Japanese women's speech styles. That is, viewing social factors as an analytic category that alters a 'normal' trajectory of second language development misses the fact that learners are always situated by age, race, class, and gender and that these social locations permeate the learning process.

The language of males or females from a sociolinguistic perspective has to be considered as a linguistic variable. Another example of gender as a secondary criterion of successful language acquisition is described by ELLIS (1994: 204).

Asian men in Britain generally attain higher levels of proficiency in L2 English than do Asian women for the simple reason that their jobs bring them into contact with the majority English-speaking group, while women are often 'enclosed' in their home.

In the new studies on gender differences in language acquisition and learning the above methodological objections encouraged researchers to look for gender-related characteristics of learners and not only for innate gender characteristics.

2.6. Internal and external gender-related characteristics related to language use

Current research suggests that adult women do not have a richer vocabulary nor higher verbal intelligence though they are better at spelling, and have a higher ver-

bal fluency understood as generating words beginning or ending with a specific letter. Most important for the purpose of the present discussion, they consistently do better than men on tests of verbal memory (KIMURA, 2006).

In school conditions girls outperform boys in linguistic abilities. There is a lot of evidence that females are more successful language learners than males. This evidence comes from tests results and all kinds of achievement measures. In connection with this the following three areas seem to be problematic for researchers; namely, a) whether males perform better than females during standardized, single performances, b) whether it is females who are better in such cases, or c) whether females score higher on measures of achievement constituting long-term assessment (as, for example, final grades). The source of these discrepancies in opinion lies in the fact that single performances are more prone to fluctuations resulting from test bias (e.g. topic selection), anxiety, and time limitations. All of these factors may differently affect males and females. On the other hand, achievement measures (e.g. final grades) may in fact take into consideration criteria other than a summary of scores during single performances. These other criteria may include, for instance, the “class participation” grade. This may be of advantage to female learners, who are more likely to participate actively during the class. Girls in general are liked more by teachers since it is easier to work with them. They are more disciplined and they accept school with its rules and regulations more willingly than boys.

The achievement measures are therefore not fully reliable sources of information which might justify the conclusion that it is natural aptitude that makes females more successful than males in language abilities. These other factors which happen to go with gender are also seen in the results of a study by PIASECKA (2010) on gender differences with respect to reading in a foreign language. They include reading preferences, attitudes to reading, use of computers, use of dictionaries, and specific learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia). These are gender-related features, components of reading aptitude which are responsible for differences between males and females in reading abilities (discussed in p. 2.8)

2.7. Gender-determined strategy use in language learning

WALLENTIN (2009) after analyzing over 140 publications on sex differences in verbal abilities, claims, among other things:

[...] it is important to stress that most language-processes are highly complex, and thus there may be more than one cognitive strategy for solving many language-related tasks....,

Sex differences may exist in the choice of strategy for certain tasks along with other socio-demographic variables, such as age, level of education and previous exposure.

Indeed the difference between males and females in the application and use of learning strategies was convincingly seen in the results of our study, “Gender Differences in Language Learning Strategy Use” (ARABSKI,1999). We investigated and wanted to show the differences between males and females in terms of their reliance on and use of learning strategies in the process of foreign language learning in a school setting.

The subjects were 30 girls and 30 boys from the final grade of secondary school (18 years old) in Katowice, Poland. They were students of an intensive English program consisting of 5—6 hours per week for the previous four years. All the students were native speakers of Polish.

The subjects were to identify strategies that they used in learning English. We used “Strategy Inventory for Language Learning” (SILL) by Oxford (1990) for this purpose. The students were to answer questions listed in SILL (see Appendix I) to identify strategies that they had used in learning English.

Our data provides evidence that a majority of strategies are used more often by girls than by boys. Only four strategies out of fifty were used more often by boys than by girls (nos. 19, 27, 39, 41), but the difference between the two groups in this respect was not statistically significant. These strategies are:

- (19) Analyzing contrastively (I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English).
- (27) Reading without looking up every word (I read English without looking up every new word).
- (39) Using relaxation (I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English).
- (41) Rewarding yourself (I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English).

There are 30 strategies from OXFORD (1990) list in which a significant statistical difference appeared and all were used more often by the female group.

A. Memory Strategies

- 1. Associating/elaborating
- 5. Using rhyming
- 6. Using pictures
- 8. Reviewing
- 9. Remembering location

B. Cognitive Strategies

- 10. Repeating
- 11. Imitating native speakers
- 12. Practising with sounds
- 14. Starting conversations in English
- 15. Watching TV/Going to movies

- 16. Reading for pleasure
- 18. Skimming
- 20. Recognizing and using formulas and patterns
- 23. Summarizing

C. *Compensation Strategies*

- 25. Using mime or gesture
- 26. Coining new words

D. *Metacognitive Strategies*

- 30. Looking for various ways to use English
- 32. Paying attention
- 33. Finding out about language learning
- 34. Planning for a language task
- 35. Looking for practice opportunities (speaking)
- 36. Looking for practice opportunities (reading)
- 37. Setting goals and objectives
- 38. Self-evaluating

E. *Affective Strategies*

- 42. Listening to your body
- 43. Writing a language learning diary
- 44. Discussing your feelings with someone else

F. *Social Strategies*

- 46. Asking for correction
- 48. Cooperating with proficient users of the new language
- 50. Developing cultural understanding

The biggest difference between males and females is manifested by the following nine strategies. In their case the mean difference between the two groups ranges from 1.0 to 1.2. The strategy numbers are given in brackets and p value is 0.00. Table 4

1.	(6)	Using pictures	1.1	0.00
2.	(8)	Reviewing	1.2	0.00
3.	(10)	Repeating	1.0	0.00
4.	(12)	Practising with sounds	1.0	0.00
5.	(25)	Using mime or gestures	1.0	0.00
6.	(33)	Finding out about language learning	1.1	0.00

7.	(44)	Discussing your feelings with someone else	1.0	0.00
8.	(46)	Asking for correction	1.0	0.00
9.	(50)	Developing cultural understanding	1.1	0.00

According to WENDEN (1991: 18), learning strategies are “mental steps or operations that learners use to learn a new language and to regulate their effort to do so.” They are abilities which have been acquired through training and they are responsible for success in the language learning process.

2.8. Gender differences in reading

Gender differences in L1 and L2 reading were investigated by PIASECKA (2010). The participants of the study were 152 girls and 163 boys, at the age of 15, secondary school students. In her study the girls show a statistically significant advantage on all the measures related to school success. They read better in both languages, they show a higher level of language aptitude and they obtain higher grades for language subjects than boys. Academically they are more successful than boys, as rendered by the mean general average grade. This does not mean that the boys in the study are not successful. They are — a general average grade of 4.25 implies a better than B level of school achievement.

Other gender differences were found with respect to leisure activities, attitude to reading and reading preferences, the use of dictionaries, the use of computers and learning difficulties.

The girls prefer spending their free time meeting friends and family, reading, watching TV, using the internet, developing their own interests and hobbies, going to the movies, practicing sports, walking, and going to the disco. The boys watch television, use the internet, meet people, read and practice sports. They also go to the movies and the disco. The statistically significant gender differences refer to meeting people, reading, watching TV, using the internet, practicing sports, going for walks and to the disco. The differences in the manner in which teenagers spend their free time show that girls care more about social relations, read more than boys, watch less television, go for walks and to discos more frequently. The boys, on the other hand, watch more television and are more interested in computers and computer technology. They also meet other people and read, but these activities are less preferred than TV and computers. They also practice more sports than the girls.

Girls' reading preferences are completely different from those of boys. Thus, females like reading youth magazines, youth literature, adventure novels, memoirs, and obligatory books from the school reading list. They also read poetry, newspapers, mystery and fantasy novels, plays and documentaries. Boys also like reading youth magazines but the girls' preferences are stronger. In contrast to girls, boys prefer newspapers, comics, and fantasy and adventure novels. Dyslexic females read better than dyslexic males.

Piasecka's conclusions are: the empirical findings refer only to a fraction of human cognitive abilities, namely to reading literacy where the female advantage is well documented across all age groups. The genders display differential abilities and skills, though recently cognitive gender differences have been reported to be decreasing (FEINGOLD, 1996; KIMURA, 1999).

3. Concluding remarks

Although genders differ as groups, an individual's activity, behavior and performance in a range of sociocultural contexts results from a combination of neuronal, genetic, hormonal, environmental and motivational factors and therefore is unique.

The study by PIASECKA (2010) is evidence that reading ability consists of or is influenced by many factors, such as language aptitude, school grades, attitude to reading and reading preferences, use of dictionaries, use of computers and learning difficulties. It seems that the same applies to other language skills with the combinations of other factors, of course, but sex is only one of the factors deciding the differences between groups representing different genders.

I have selected the above findings to show that when studying gender differences in language learning we have to consider other factors than gender and by so doing we become acquainted with them better.

Studies on gender differences in language learning make us aware of the complexity of the role of gender in language acquisition and in the language learning process. The factors which may influence this role and only those which were mentioned in this presentation are (putting aside methodological shortcomings like small samples):

- A age
- B social locations
- C language aptitude related features

A: There was no evidence of sex difference in verbal ability until about age 10 or 11.

B: a) Western women in Japan learning Japanese applied simplification strategies because of their distaste for Japanese constructions of femininity.

b) Asian men in Britain attain higher proficiency in L2 English because they have more contact with English than their wives.

c) school conditions do not guarantee reliable achievement measures.

C: The use of learning strategies.

In the case of reading:

- reading preferences
- attitudes to reading
- use of computers
- use of dictionaries

For other language skills (e.g. speaking or listening) counterparts can also be found.

Studying gender differences we discover factors which decide successful language learning. We discover which components of e.g. reading abilities, and to what degree, decide proficiency levels in this respect.

In section 2.2. we have presented an overview of studies on differences between male and female language. It was the starting point of the discussion which then followed and concerned the differences between males and females in second language acquisition and foreign language learning. Different aspects of the problem were presented together with different methodology, points of view and different study results. The main idea of the chapter is to show how they were evolving in the course of time.

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