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Revisiting the Role of Gender in the Use of Language Learning Strategies: A Poststructuralist Look

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Abstract

The paper makes an endeavor to investigate the influence of gender on the employment of language learning strategies. In this regard, from post-structuralist look, the paper, not considering gender as a fixed variable, holds the impact of gender on the use of language learning strategies are mostly culturally-based. Henceforth, it is worth investigating the reason behind the use of particular strategies in order to provide the underlying condition for students who lag behind. The paper can be an ignition to raise the interest of researchers to pursue the reason behind the use of a particular strategy rather than to be in favor of finding the frequent users of language learning strategies.

Key Words: language learning strategies, gender, sex, disposition

Research on language learning strategies has been carried out extensively by several scholars (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990) since mid 1990s. But there is consensus among scholars that language learning strategies are plans (Wenden & Rubin, 1987) and intentional behavior (Richards & Platt, 1992) that help learners better learn. Nevertheless, as far as the classification of language learning strategies is concerned, much of the earlier research, mostly in the 1970s, concentrated on compiling inventories of the learning strategies that learners were observed to use or reported to use. In this regard, O'Malley's and Chamot (1990) divide language learning strategies into three main categories: meta-cognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective strategies. At the same time, Oxford (1990) sees the aim of language learning strategies as being oriented towards the development of communicative competence. She divides language learning strategies into two main classes: direct and indirect. Strategies are called direct if they are directly used in dealing with a new language. Direct strategies are memory, cognitive and compensation. The indirect strategies, in

contrast, employed for general management of learning include metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Along the same line, Cohen (1998), broadly, differentiates language learning strategies according to whether they are cognitive, meta-cognitive, affective, or social.

What is ignored in introducing language learning strategies to students is the concept of disposition (Maftoon & Shakouri, 2012) and gender (Jiménez-Catalán, 2000). There is not much space in the paper to delve into the concept of disposition and how it gets emanated, but it suffices to maintain that disposition as a key factor refers to "a pre-existing readiness for something, a readiness to act in a particular way" (Littlejohn, 2008, p. 11). Regarding language learning strategy training, Littlejohn claims "if the learners are not already disposed towards making changes to their way of going about learning, then strategy training is unlikely to bring about any substantive change" (p. 11). Jiménez-Catalan (2000) contends that individual differences such as age, aptitude, learning style and motivation are

very-well focused on in most SLA research studies, but gender is often ignored.

Accordingly, as the employment of strategy is culturally-bound, the writer claim introducing new strategies are curtailed due to learners' previous experience of the students. In a sense, using a particular strategy, for instance, by females is deeply rooted in the history that people's identity is shaped by. However, since individuals are unique, it is indisputable that we cannot assume that all are in favor of the specific strategy employed in the class. Such a perspective needs to emphasize the gradual development of attitudes to learning, and use any realizations about later successful approaches to language learning to inform the development primary school activities and materials. What the paper makes an attempt to fill the gap in research field is that teaching cannot be gender-blind. In this regard, the researchers hold that the employment of a variety of strategies by males and females are directly related to their disposition. Accordingly, in order to help second language learners in general and less successful learners in particular, researchers have recommended integrating strategy training into language curricula (Chamot & Kupper, 1989).

Language Learning Strategies:

Although long has been worked on language learning strategies, there is no consensus among scholars on what a learning strategy really means in second language acquisition (SLA) (Aslan, 2009). Even, Oxford (1990) whose classification seems the most widely accepted taxonomy cannot be considered as comprehensive since many more strategies may be identified in the future. More specifically, Oxford defines L2 Learning strategies as specific actions and behaviors employed by learners to tackle a problem. Earlier, Rubin (1975), as a pioneer in the development of language learning

strategies, maintains learning strategies are "techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge" (p. 43). Though Rubin's definition is too broad, it provides the starting point for several scholars to provide a variety of definition. Accordingly, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) define learning strategies "the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (p. 1). Oxford (1990) also maintains that language learning strategies refer to "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills" (p. 18).

Why Language Learning Strategies?

Strategy per se is neutral until the context of its use is considered (Oxford, 2003). In the same line, Oxford outlines several conditions through which the employment of a given strategy can be useful. To her, the strategy should (a) relate well to the L2 task at hand; (b) fit particular students' learning style preferences; and (c) employ and link it with other relevant strategies. Henceforth, those strategies that can fulfill these requirements "make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). Nevertheless, the suggested inventories suffer from several shortcomings. One of the plausible problems observed in many strategy inventories refer to the overemphasis placed on cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and the less emphasis ascribed to affective and social strategies (Oxford, 1990). Elsewhere, Oxford (1994) contends that the existence of these distinct strategy typologies indicates a major problem in the research area of L2 learning strategies: lack of a *coherent, well accepted* system for describing these strategies. Henceforth, redressing the perceived problem, Oxford, classifies learning strategies into six groups:

- *Memory strategies* that relate to how students remember language;
- *Cognitive strategies* that refer to how students think about their learning;
- *Compensation strategies* that enable students to overcome limited knowledge;
- *Metacognitive strategies* that relate to how students manage their own learning;
- *Affective strategies* which relate to students' feelings; and
- *Social strategies* which involve learning by interaction

Defining language learning strategies as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations” (p. 8), Oxford (1990) lists the main features of language learning strategies as:

- Contribute to the main goal, communicative competence.
- Allow learners to become more self-directed.
- Expand the role of teachers.
- Problem-oriented.
- Specific actions taken by the learner.
- Involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive.
- Support learning both directly and indirectly.
- Are not always observable.
- Are often conscious.
- Can be taught.
- Are flexible.
- Are influenced by a variety of factors. (P. 9)

Gender:

Among the factors that have an impact on the choice of language learning strategies, the one that less consideration is given to is gender. It is a truism that males and females employ different strategies in relation to their gender characteristics (Aslan, 2009; Ehrman & Oxford, 1989). Nevertheless, Aslan (2009) contends that there is no consensus among scholars

regarding the relationship between gender and language learning strategies.

Gender and sex are usually used interchangeably. Nevertheless, gender as Aslan (2009) asserts “is a completely different notion and it is not a biological fact at all” (p. 7). Butler (1990) holds “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a ‘natural’ kind of being” (p.32). Thus, gender cannot be considered as equivalent to sex. Connell (2002), in this regard, states, “gender is [...] a matter of the social relations within which groups and individuals act ... [;g]ender must be understood as a social structure. It is not an expression of biology, nor a fixed dichotomy in human life or character”. (p. 9).

Inspired by Labov (1991), Ellis (1994) outlines two principles regarding gender and sex differences. Labov (1991) suggests that based on sociolinguistic stratification, men use a higher frequency of non-standard forms than women; furthermore, in the majority of linguistic changes, women use a higher frequency of incoming forms than men. Though Ellis's (1994) studies were inconclusive, he, based on Labov's generalizations, goes on to hold that women in comparison with men are better at L2 learning. However, Ellis himself contends that it is not always the case that females outperform males. To him, “Asian men [, for instance,] in Britain generally attain higher levels of proficiency in L2 English than do Asian women” (p. 204). Simply, for the following reason that, men due to their jobs are more in contact with English speaking groups. What Ellis insists is that sex (gender) per se is neutral; there is a variety of factors including age, ethnicity, and, in particular, social class that gender is in contact. Aslan (2009), accordingly, claims “gender itself is not a stable factor, it depends on many variables such as

biological factors, cultural, and social elements” (p. 57). Henceforth, in the paper, the interdependency of gender and the choice of language learning strategies is highly emphasized. In sum, regarding the relationship between gender and language learning strategies, Green and Oxford (1995) concluded that more successful learners, in general, and females, in particular, use much more strategies than men. However, no one denies that gender is not a fixed variable that always leads to a generalizable outcome.

Gender Models:

Investigating the role of gender in the success of L2 is not a new issue. There is a considerable amount of research on how gender shapes language learning. Generally there are two perspectives regarding gender and language learning relationship: (1) gender shapes language use; and (2) language use shapes gender (O’loughlin, 2001). The two main models adopted by researchers to investigate the effect of gender on language are the *deficit* model (Lakoff, 1975) and the *(cultural) difference* model influenced by Tannen (1990). To Lakoff’s (1975) model, women’s talk is featured in negative terms and that of men in positive terms. The deficit model, portrays women as disadvantaged speakers, due to their upbringing and socialization as females (Block, 2002). Lakoff’s ideas about women’s language use can be divided into three categories: first, it lacks the resources that would enable women to express themselves strongly; second, it encourages women to talk about trivial subjects; and third, it requires women to speak tentatively (cited in O’loughlin, 2001). The pedagogical implication derived from Lakoff’s (1975) model insists that “men acquire language abilities in natural way early in their lives and if women want to challenge men and become successful in the world of business, they have to adopt, or even imitate the characteristics of men

in communication” (Aslan, 2009, p. 10). In contrast, the difference model influenced by Tannen (1990) is oriented toward a more positive light. In other words, it does not perceive the differences negatively (Aslan, 2009). Aslan holds, though men and women are different, they are equal. To O’loughlin (2001), the difference approach suggests that girls and boys grow up in relatively segregated, same-sex, peer groups in which they learn different ways of relating to one another, and as a consequence, acquire different communicative styles. In other words, men and women are seen as belonging to different cultures. Moreover, Tannen (1993) asserts that when the communication between men and women breaks, it is resulted from misinterpreting the other party’s form of interaction, “not because of the men’s dominating power in the communication between men and women” (Aslan, 2009, p. 12). Focusing on the positive aspects of women’s unique communicative style, we go on to hold that developing strategies that are conducive to celebrating the differences and increasing the ambiguity tolerance can enhance the process of language acquisition.

O’loughlin (2001), on elaborating the role of language on gender claims that nowadays, many of the assumptions underlying research into the relationship between gender and language use have been called into questions. Poststructuralist perspective of gender, in disfavor with deficit and difference models, for example, contends that:

- 1.The ideal of a simple one to one relationship between sex and gender has been questioned.
- 2.The notion of gender is a culturally constructed notion.
- 3.The role of agency has been given new prominence; that is, the social construction of gender is no longer seen from a purely deterministic perspective;

instead it is interpreted as something which can be resisted or contested.

What poststructuralists adhere to is the fact that gender is not a stable and conservative term. Put similarly, gender is respected as a social phenomenon. In favor of poststructuralism, it can be asserted that gender is not a predictable and generalizable concept, but a social construction within a specific culture. In fact, in post-structural perspective of gender, there appears a shift from positivistic conceptualization of gender to a constructivist view of gender as a social phenomenon.

Inclination toward a particular strategy:

In most of the studies in which gender differences emerged, the results showed that females use significantly more language learning strategies than males (Green & Oxford, 1995). But less research has been conducted in favor of the reasons behind the use of a particular strategy by either females or males. Hong and Leavell (2006) claim that, according to several scholars (e.g. Ehrman & Oxford, 1989), females “show more use of social learning strategies” (p. 401). Hong and Leavell, (2006) continue that “gender difference findings in favor of greater strategy use by females may be tempered by the context and/or culture of the language learning” (p. 401). Along the same line, they put forth “cultural background... has been linked to use and choice of language learning strategies” (p. 401). This favors the fact that “Asian groups educated in a traditionally didactic settings chose memorization strategies” (p. 401). In sum, the strategies favored by a group might be the ultimate product of the philosophy and history through which they are educated. Though, it is difficult to investigate the reasons behind the employment of a specific strategy, it is well-appreciating to see why a group of learners prefer one strategy to the other. However, several

studies (e.g., Wharton, 2000) reveal contradictory findings to the claim that Asians prefer memory strategies to communicative strategies. In fact, “the learning situation has not been separated or isolated from the total context” (p. 50). As Yan (2007) asserts in China, for instance, students and teachers are influenced by Confucian tradition. In fact, the relation between teacher and students is hierarchical. The teacher is the authority and the power is not decentered. Put differently, knowledge is respected as property that is only transmitted by teachers who take the control of the class. In such a condition, students are always considered as receptacles of ideas who only receive the information, and students’ voices turn out to stick to the margin. As Maftoon and Shakouri (2012) indicate, “the strategies employed by teachers in [such classes], directly or indirectly inculcate a thought into students’ beliefs system” (p. 45). Thus, to them, “the employment of strategy is culturally bound” (p. 45). Nevertheless, as human beings are unique, no one can claim that students are in favor of the strategies employed by teachers. Even, in an essentialist tradition, there may be found students who are not compatible with the strategies employed by teachers, though it is an exception. Li (2004), also, states that learners’ belief system has an inevitable impact on the use of strategies. No one denies that some beliefs are formed by students’ previous experiences as language learners, and this previous experience is surely part of learners’ beliefs systems. Park (1995, cited in Maftoon & Shakouri, 2012) concluded that the Korean students use more meta-cognitive and memory strategies than communicative strategies, mostly because they are interested in having English speaking friends. Park claims that the major reason behind students’ interest in practicing strategies to learn English was due to the fear of making mistakes. Wenden and Rubin

(1987) also assert that the main reason to learn communicative strategies has been to be able to *use* the language; however, the students who place emphasis on the *learning* of language see cognitive strategies, i.e., memorization, vital.

But why do women prefer to use more social language learning strategies than males? Hong and Leavell (2006) assert “women tend to build relationships and use social networks with greater consistency than men” (p. 411). However, in the study conducted by Radwan (2010), quite a contrary result is achieved Radwan investigating use of language learning strategies by students majoring in English in Oman concluded that male students use more social strategies than female students. He further adds that “the conservative nature of culture, customs, and habits prevents females in the Arab World socializing and establishing relationships outside their immediate circles, which is a prerequisite for excelling in acquiring a foreign language” (p. 139).

However, in the study conducted by Gascoigne, (2002), the results indicate that females mostly prefer to rely on questions, justifiers, intensive adverbs, personal pronouns and word-initial adverbs; henceforth, the characteristics observed in females’ speech show that girls are in attempt to establish social relationship and seek social approval more than male students (Niyikos, 1990, cited in Aslan, 2009). Furthermore, in developing a curriculum, the material designer can consider the topic of the text as an important factor in motivating students in the use of related strategies. Female students did better on female topics, and male students will surely do well on male topics (Shakouri & Salighe, 2012).

Conclusion

The influence of gender on the use of language learning strategy is inconclusive. Due to replicable nature of research, so

much research has been conducted concerning the frequent use of language learning strategies. However, research on the causal reason of the use of a particular language learning strategy by a group of females or males has less been carried out. It can be offered that delving into the reasons for the use of a particular strategy, for instance, can be more beneficial for teachers, educators, and curriculum developers to meet the students’ needs. Undeniably, the history of education is deeply rooted in its philosophy. As Hanson (1962) declares, “philosophy of science without history is empty” (p. 580). No one denies that human beings are highly influenced by the culture they are brought up. Henceforth, claiming that females and males have inclination toward a particular set of strategies that they are brought up with is not implausible; however, gender is not a fixed social factor. In a sense, “the change in a society per se is dynamic, whether it is traditional or modern” (Maftoon & Shakouri, 2013, p. 60). Thus, it is not legitimate to claim that a tradition community has always existed in its fixed framework so that students, either males or females, come up with a fixed inclination towards a set of strategies. From a poststructuralist look, every perspective can be resisted and challenged. Accordingly, as Maftoon and Shakouri claim Iranian teachers, not Iranian education system, for instance, though are perennialist in teaching, have some inclinations towards progressive existential-ism. Thus, it is not totally deterministic to assume that females, in general, are willing toward a specific set of ideologies, in general, and language learning strategies, in particular. Nevertheless, the reason for the use of particular strategies, by either females or males, is plausible to be thoroughly investigated in order to enhance the pedagogical implications of education.

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