



Gender Differences in the Use of English Vocabulary Learning Strategies in Chinese Senior High Schools

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Abstract

Language is an important tool for human communication. In the process of language learning, gender differences can not be ignored because it exists in all human language acquisition and learning. This paper tries to explore gender differences in students' choosing of English vocabulary learning strategies in Chinese high schools. Vocabulary learning is quite basic in second language acquisition, and it has already been attached great importance in Chinese language education. For our language teachers, learning strategies should be observed and understood better which will facilitate our language teaching a lot. This survey is expected to make a contribution to the further research in this area by briefly analyzing gender differences and the use of English Vocabulary learning strategies and tries to help the teachers reconsider teaching strategies so as to enhance language learning to the uttermost.

Key words: Gender differences; Language education; Language learning; Vocabulary learning strategies; Teaching strategy

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INTRODUCTION

Early in the 20th century, linguists and socialists have paid attention to gender differences in human language, and

found that there are differences between man and woman in the use of vocabulary, syntax and communication, etc.. Language and gender are an area of study within sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and related fields that investigate varieties of speech associated with a particular gender, or social norms for such gendered language use (Tannen & Deborah, 2006). The reason for gender differences is varied with regard to physical factors, social psychology and arrangements. With the study of gender differences, we could make improvements in second language acquisition and learning. Moreover, at present, English language learning, especially vocabulary learning in Chinese high schools is paid more attention these days, since most of the language teachers tend to do activities directly without explaining words and phrases first in the research course and observation classes. Students are asked to read more and more in order to recognize new words and phrases. But one biggest problem for them is omitted, i.e. the master of the vocabulary. If we can recognize gender differences in language vocabulary learning and give individualized strategies in English language learning process, effective teaching will be fully achieved.

1. STUDIES ON GENDER DIFFERENCES AND LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

1.1 Factors Contributed to Gender Differences

Many scholars contribute themselves to the research on gender difference. In this section, we are going to discuss it in three aspects, i.e. physiological factors, psychological factors and personal experiences.

Firstly, it is indicated in previous researches that there are functional differences between two cerebral hemisphere in female and male learners. German neurologist Paul Julius Mobius (1904) wrote about sex

differences in his book by analyzing the human brain. He carefully measured the skulls of the two sexes, especially comparing the skull of a man who died at age 60 with that of a woman. Finally he discovered that the capacity of a man's skull is on average about 8% more than that of a woman. Thus he made a conclusion that women are "physiologically weak-minded". We could not say his findings are totally right or wrong, because there are still some other differences he didn't discover. For example, Leonard (1998) found in his research that the cerebral cortex where most of our complex thinking takes place, is thicker in women's brains than that in men's. In addition, according to many researchers, the dominance of left cerebral hemisphere exist in female learners which would facilitate language communication and short-term memory, while the dominance of right cerebral hemisphere in male learners could help enhance comprehensive competence and analytical ability.

Secondly, male learners and female learners have distinguished psychological differences. Generally speaking, male students tend to be confident, adventurous, independent and forthright but careless, while female students are quiet, delicate and irresolute. These psychological characters lead to some differences between male and female students in the language learning process. To some degree, male learners would do better self-recognition and self-evaluation since they are apt to be more objective than females.

Lastly, different life experiences may have different influences on the use of language. Gender differences have profound historical reasons. Roles change between man and woman in different human societies, thus the transition from matriarchal society to patriarchal society leads to the dominant position for the man which may encourage them to speak more and try doughtily in language learning classes.

Gender differences have been studied in various fields, so some other findings could also be taken into account. For instance, Douglas and Burman (2006) indicate after the observation and research:

- Girls speak earlier and more clearly than boys.
- The 20-month old girl on average has twice the vocabulary of the 20-month old boy.
- The language processing of boys is more perceptual by seeing and saying.
- Boys are better at language understanding and verbal reasoning.
- There are no huge gender differences in the knowledge of vocabulary, but females tend to be better at spelling and grammar.

1.2 A Brief Review of Language Learning Strategies

O'Malley and Chamot (1987) put learning strategies into three main categories: meta-cognitive, cognitive

and social strategies. The former may help the learners become advanced organizers who can give selective attention, do advanced preparation, self-evaluation and self-reinforcement. Cognitive strategies operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning (p.44), which refers to repetition, translation, note-taking, grouping and contextualization. Social strategies are used to interact with another person which we always identify as cooperation.

Language learning strategies are behaviors or techniques employed by learners to facilitate learning or acquiring a language (Oxford, 1990). There are six language learning strategies given by Oxford (1990):

- Memory strategy for remembering and retrieving new information.
- Cognitive strategy for understanding and producing the language.
- Metacognitive strategy for coordinating the learning process.
- Compensation strategy for using the language despite knowledge gaps.
- Affective strategy for regulating emotion.
- Social strategy for learning with others.

Language researchers have noticed that there is an obvious difference between the use frequency of language learning strategies and the type learners chooses. Individual differences have been identified as factors which may have a great influence on the use of language strategies and the development. On the whole, there are two main categories: internal and external factors. Internal factors refer to age, attitude, motivation, personality, intelligence and language aptitude. And external factors mean teaching methods, learning environment, social background and ways of evaluation.

Motivation is one of the most influential factors and usually regarded as learning impetus that help students understand the relationship between themselves and the study, maintain their strength and keep studying. A definite motivation is quite helpful for learners to improve language learning efficiency. Personality is another important factor we should take into consideration. Students are mostly recognized by Chinese language teachers as introvert type and extrovert type. Extrovert students are more likely to be brave and easy-going, but part of whom would tend to have a poor sense of responsibility and less attention in language study. Introvert students are more likely to be timid and dependent, but part of whom would like to obey the rules and regulations, and have great patience in the language learning process. Gender differences are also paid much attention in this area. In Chinese English language classes, girls always do much better than boys since they are more interested and more willing to spend time in language study.

2. GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF ENGLISH VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES IN CHINESE SENIOR SCHOOLS

2.1 Present Situation

Vocabulary teaching in China is still a big problem for English language teachers, especially in Chinese high schools. For those senior school students, English is no longer unfamiliar and complicated as what they feel in junior schools. They begin to consider how to achieve efficient language learning in the limited time. However, most Chinese teachers continue teaching vocabulary as an isolated language unit, just emphasizing the pronunciation, the spelling and the meanings. Students are always asked to recite the words one by one which makes them feel bored and finally lose their interest in learning. Grammar-Translation Method and Audio-lingual Method are commonly adopted in vocabulary learning process, which has been considered these days as insipid and tedious that kills the learners' enthusiasm in language study. The main reason is we ignore the context. Words are memorized for dealing with examinations but seldom for daily communication and practice. Therefore, even the students spend much time remembering words, they still do not get good result.

Studies on vocabulary learning strategies in China started in 1980s when there were mostly the introduction of the researches in the west. Then Chinese language scholars began to do more researches on Chinese learners' choice of vocabulary learning strategies in various aspects. Wen (2004) adopted qualitative analysis and found that different learning results exist between successful learners and unsuccessful learners who adopted different strategies. Foong and Goh (1997) picked 175 students in China and observed carefully. The final result they got tells that female students use language strategies more often when studying vocabularies. Besides, female students use compensation method and effective strategy more frequently than male students. Wang (2004) investigated 50 undergraduates about the strategy they chose for memorizing words, and found those strategies did work in vocabulary study such as repetition, note-taking and management, etc..

2.2 The use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Gender Differences

Gender differences in the use of vocabulary learning strategies will be analyzed in this section in three aspects mentioned in part 1 according to O'Malley and Chamot (1987) with reference to Oxford's categories (1990) meanwhile.

Meta-cognitive strategy includes strategies such as plan making and implementing, directed attention, learner autonomy and self-testing. The differences in the

adoption of language strategies between male and female students exist mainly because of their different cognitive style (attitude), motivation and personality. Influenced by Chinese traditional culture, girls are more careful and attentive in language classes. They may spend more time in making plans and have patience in words repetition. But boys rarely do plan making and reviewing, hence female students are likely to employ meta-cognitive strategies more in vocabulary study than male students.

Female students also turn to use more cognitive strategies to understand and produce the language such as repetition, note-taking and translation. Take dictionary for example. It is the most convenient resort available (if internet is unavailable) for both male and female students to learn a new word and gain more specific example sentences. It is showed that female students would find dictionary more useful than that for male students, because the former intends to understand the full meaning and use after consulting the dictionary while the latter always considers knowing the meaning is quite enough. Note-taking and repetition are also popular among girl students since they are helpful to memorizing words and sentence structures. Boy students prefer contextualization which is due to their typical cognitive style and characters. According to Douglas and Burman (2006), boys like to memorize words and sentences with the help of visual images and better at verbal reasoning which may help them have long-term memory compared with female students.

Rubin (1975) pointed out learning strategies would be different according to the different circumstances, such as different tasks, learning stage, individual style and the different cognitive style. Female students have a better understanding of what they should do in the practical study and are willing to use appropriate meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies to assist their vocabulary learning. While when adopting social strategies, male students are more eager to express their ideas and dare to make mistakes. Even female students are encouraged to speak more, most of the time, they'd like to keep in silence in order to avoid mistake and becoming embarrassed.

3. PEDAGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH VOCABULARY TEACHING IN CHINESE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS

3.1 Individualized Teaching in Chinese Language Classroom

Researches have shown that when teachers' teaching style matches students' various characters, it will help the students improve their academic performances and enhance learning efficiency. First of all, as foreign language teachers, we should pay attention to observe

our students carefully and know their advantages and disadvantages better than before. One of the most important things is to arouse the awareness of the differences between male and female students in English language learning class so that they could be more aware of their learning style and approaches and have a definite target. Secondly, teachers should enforce the study of teaching theories and reconsider the traditional teaching idea and methodology. According to the new policy published recently, English will not be one of the main subjects any more in China's college entrance examination. Instead, high school students can attend the English test twice a year in their three years' study and the highest score will be taken as a reference for different colleges in our country. It implies that teachers could spend more time designing more interesting classroom activities to encourage female students to practice words and sentences more in listening and speaking classes and male students to pay attention to regular vocabulary memorization and task completion. Outdoor activities should be advocated which might be set in real social scenes like supermarket and library where they can remember and master the use of the language. All in all, teachers could try to give individualized assignments for boys and girls which they may be no good at before.

3.2 Vocabulary Learning Strategy Training Based on Gender Differences

Male students are more independent and unwilling to be dominated according to our discussion above, but the majority of them have impoverished vocabulary because they do not want to indulge themselves in the study of language routines. Language teachers could put male and female students in the same group in which we let the male students play the role as a dominator and an organizer then they will continue studying in a cheerful mood. For instance, we ask them to give a regular duty report weekly but the presupposition is that boys collect materials and write the report and girls are responsible for presenting it in a fresh and entertaining way.

Female students generally improve their language competence through note-taking, dictation test and dialogue reciting. Due to their different vocabulary learning style, teachers could let them do performances and story-telling since most of them are patient and careful but sometimes could not catch the deeper meanings and usages in a better way.

For both male and female students in Chinese high schools, if time permits, diary writing is a good way for them to express their ideas and feelings which at the same time can help the teachers know their vocabulary study and make corrections as soon as possible. Furthermore, teachers and students can exchange their thoughts directly in this way about English language study and problem solving.

CONCLUSION

Gender differences in language learning are closely related to physiology, psychology, social background and personal experience. It is discussed attentively in this paper that there are gender differences in the adoption of language learning strategies, especially vocabulary learning strategies. As for the three main vocabularies learning strategies mentioned in part 1, respectively meta-cognitive strategy, cognitive strategy and social strategy, there are priorities in choosing different strategies for different genders. Male students tend to employ social strategies more often than female students, while female students are likely to use meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies more frequently than male ones. Since there are distinctive differences in the use of vocabulary learning strategies, language teachers should take advantage of them and provide individuality teaching. Vocabulary learning strategy training is quite necessary for Chinese high school students. If gender differences could be treated in an appropriate way in language teaching, and a systematical and reasonable teaching pattern could be developed and provided, vocabulary teaching and language learning will become easy and enjoyable. It is hoped that this study could contribute to further studies in vocabulary teaching and learning.

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