

The relationship between gender and learning styles amongst A level modern languages students

Anne-Marie Maubach and Carol Morgan
University of Bath

This article describes research conducted with 72 MFL A level students regarding possible links between gender and learning styles. In terms of confirming conventional wisdom, findings only coincided in four areas: 'male' risk-taking, spontaneous speaking and self-confidence; and 'female' organisation of written work. Gender-linked differences in other areas were not confirmed.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to examine the truth of certain theories relating to the relationship between gender and language learning with reference to the preferred learning styles of a small sample of Year 12 and 13 sixth-form students of A level French and German. This inquiry is based on a questionnaire (Appendix A) completed by 72 A level students: 57 girls and 15 boys. The survey results are analysed in relation to established theories about the relationship between gender and language learning, and in the light of the data received from this study some provisional conclusions are drawn as to the relationship between gender and learning styles and activity preference in the study of foreign languages at A level.

BOYS AND GIRLS: BIOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

Let us first examine theories concerning sex difference and verbal skills. It seems to be generally recognized that biological differences between the male and female brain do play a role in the development of cognitive skills. Maccoby and Jacklin (1975) support the generalisation of girls' superiority over boys in the early acquisition of speech. Their tests also show girls from the age of 10 outscoring boys on a variety of measures of verbal competence, but conclude that this may simply show a slower rate of linguistic maturation on the part of boys. By the time students start A level courses, developmental differences may therefore have evened out.

Swann (1992) considers the issue of brain

lateralization which holds that sex differences in verbal ability are very slight, but remains unconvinced that there is an association between stronger lateralization, as in the male brain, and weaker linguistic skills. If only one side of the male brain is working during verbal tests, compared with both right and left hemispheres in the female brain, it might be assumed that women have the advantage in language learning. An assumption that boys are biologically second class in the foreign language classroom could be seen as offensive by many, and certainly there is a danger of reinforcing general trends in the uptake of foreign languages among boys post 16, if they are viewed as linguistically less able than girls from the outset. (Callaghan though takes the opposite view, 1998.)

If we do accept the role of biology in determining linguistic achievement, there may be grounds for separate teaching programmes for the two sexes, as trialled recently by Barton (1996), who appears to have experienced some success in addressing the issue of male underachievement at GCSE level in modern languages. The effects of segregating the sexes for language lessons and finding a teaching strategy to suit the learning styles and interests of boys may uncover some valuable answers to this concern. Dividing the sexes at A level will, for the time being, remain impossible in the majority of mixed schools, where the number of boys choosing to pursue foreign languages is so low. Clark (1998) speaks of a "dramatic gender polarisation post-16," quoting the DfEE Statistical Bulletin figures for 1997, which illustrate the low numbers of boys taking French at A level. If these trends of poor performance among boys at GCSE and low take-up at A level persist, the argument about innate gender differences may seem to gain strength.

Suzanne Graham's review of the research into gender-related differences and language learning ability asserts (1997: 99), however, 'that innate

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differences are non-existent or at best insignificant...the higher incidence of successful linguists among girls must therefore be attributed to such factors as socialisation, attitudes and stereotyping.'

Rafik Loulidi (1990) states that the biological evidence is "scant and inconclusive", finding other explanations for boys' unwillingness to study languages: sex and career stereotyping, attitudes to the subject and teacher, and socio-cultural pressures. Pritchard (1984) sees a difference in boys' attitudes towards French and German, relating male preference for German with the cultural associations of these two subjects: French apparently following more traditionally female interests such as cuisine, fashion and perfume, and German linking to topics of more 'male' interest such as war, industry and cars. These cultural interests seem insufficient to explain the poor recruitment of boys to French A level, as A level courses involve much more purely linguistic work than topic-based study and there is now more scope for teachers and students to make an independent choice of topics, according to preferred interests. The day-to-day experience of language learning in the classroom would appear to be a more fundamental question.

Whether the causes are biological or socio-cultural, it seems that modern languages teachers face a more extreme gender divide than many other subject areas. There may be no clear answer to the causes of this situation, but further investigation into perceived gender differences can only help to inform the teaching styles of practitioners. It was decided to take a closer look at the preferred learning styles of a sample of students in order to see if typical assumptions about gender difference in language learning held true for them. In an illuminating article Dianne Place (1997) draws together a list of characteristics commonly held to describe girls' and boys' approaches to learning a foreign language. From this list, and using Brown's (1994) descriptors of learning styles, ten key areas were selected which seem to be most likely to reveal a gender divide in the students' approach to their work. The questionnaire design itself relied heavily on Brown's learning styles' checklist (1994), but this was adapted to focus on issues which may reveal more divisive answers between the sexes. Some important caveats to this study are outlined below.

CAVEATS

The selection of the characteristics used in the questionnaire was based upon one researcher's view of the issue and upon her observations from teaching experience, and it could certainly be argued that there are other equally valid or more valid characteristics which merit investigation. The questionnaire itself was limited in scope, reducing each characteristic to a simple statement, which

inevitably involves personal interpretation of the theory. Before completing the questionnaire, students were informed only that this was to form part of a study about the different ways in which people learn effectively. No reference was made to gender difference, in order to reduce the likelihood of respondents answering in stereotypical ways. For ease of analysis, the questionnaire places supposedly male characteristics on the left hand side (boxes 1 and 2) and corresponding female characteristics on the right (boxes 4 and 5). (Here 1 and 5 indicate strong agreement and 2 and 4 just agreement with the given statements; see Appendix 1). If responses followed the expected pattern, these would then be visible at a glance. This format does, however, have the weakness that students could identify this pattern and that this could influence their responses.

There was also the danger that some responses, such as claiming to have a well-organised file as opposed to an untidy one, could appear more positive than others and that students might wish to convey the best possible image of their study patterns. In an attempt to overcome this, they were asked to respond truthfully and were informed that their answers would play no part in the assessment of their work, so that they would be less likely to answer in the way they thought their teacher would want. As the findings were based on these self-reporting techniques, a student might have had the opportunity to create a certain picture of their approach to work, positive or otherwise, which might then have led to some unreliability in answers. A larger-scale study could perhaps include a specific task to test whether student learning styles were actually consistent with the answers given in the questionnaire.

The sample group is also rather small in size, partly due to the difficulty of finding boys studying a foreign language to A level, and there would, therefore, be considerable danger in assuming any applicability of these results to the wider teaching of modern languages. As only boys who had chosen to continue their study of French or German were involved, this study inevitably excludes the more extreme problems and characteristics of boys who have not enjoyed success in GCSE languages. Finally, it is important to note that even if clear gender differences do arise in the study, we can only ever talk in generalised terms about tendencies, as every learner has a unique personality which will influence learning far more than gender. This view is supported by Clark (1998), who, after carrying out extensive interviews with pupils of modern languages across gender and ability groups during a five-year period, comments that intelligence and socio-economic background are likely to have a greater influence on perceptions of modern languages study than gender.

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QUESTION ONE: FIELD DEPENDENCE

The first question posed to students aimed at discovering whether there was any male/female divide amongst the students in terms of their field dependence. Brown (1994: 106) defines field dependence as: 'the tendency to be "dependent" on the total field so that the parts embedded within the field are not easily perceived, though that total field is perceived more clearly as a unified whole.'

For sixth-form language learners, we might interpret field dependence as the ability to see the whole picture, perhaps understanding the gist of a difficult text, (rather than focusing on complete understanding of individual sentences) — a skill very much emphasised by modern A level syllabuses, which require students to work at speed through a variety of texts.

Oxford (1994: 141) states that: 'females, especially adolescents and adults, tend to be more field dependent (global) and males more field independent (analytic)'. Answers to the questionnaire demonstrated compatibility with this theory in that none of the boys in the sample chose the highest score 5 for being presented with the whole picture if this meant taking in a lot of new information at one time. Yet far fewer than one might expect, only 2 of the 15, chose the box closest to the typical field-independent statement: 'if I have a large amount of new material to learn, I like to take things one step at a time'. Yet the majority did show a preference for breaking information down into smaller steps. Surprisingly, however, so did over half of the girls surveyed. The option of being able to see the whole picture at once appealed strongly to only 4 girls. The average score for this question thus revealed no significant gender difference.

QUESTION TWO: DEDUCTIVE v INDUCTIVE LEARNING

The second question originated from the theories of left- and right-brain functioning, and research on the biological differences in brain lateralization has already been mentioned. Brown (1994) comments that the left hemisphere is associated with logical and analytical thought, whereas the right hemisphere is more efficient in processing visual and emotional information. Brown (1994) also refers to research by Krashen, Seliger and Harnett which seems to indicate that left-brain dominant learners prefer to be presented with a rule they can then consistently apply (deductive learning), whereas right-brain dominant learners prefer to uncover the rules for themselves (inductive learning). Oxford (1994) reports that females tend to favour subjectivity and emotional responses when learning a new language, while males prefer objectivity: working from rules, facts and logic. The males in the survey did indeed

express a preference for a deductive grammatical learning method, with just over half giving the application of rules presented to them the highest score (1). It seems that the word 'logic' had much greater appeal than the thought of using intuition. However, approximately 73% of girls in the survey also selected response 1 or 2 (as opposed to 80% of boys), indicating a preference for the presentation of grammatical rules as opposed to trusting their intuition in this respect. Here again, then, there did not appear to be significant gender differences.

QUESTION THREE: TOLERANCE OF AMBIGUITY

Tolerance of ambiguity can be a key area for foreign language learners. From anecdotal evidence, students of French often complain that when it comes to learning the formation of verbs, there seem to be more verbs that are exceptions than verbs which follow the rules, and clearly this can be a factor adversely affecting the motivation of those who have a low tolerance of ambiguity. The third question in the questionnaire is a measure of this tolerance or lack of it amongst the students. The boys in the sample showed quite a high tolerance of ambiguity, almost half choosing score 4 in answer to this question. However, we might expect a higher tolerance of ambiguity amongst males who have chosen to study languages post-16 than amongst the male population at large. The females in the sample actually demonstrated a lower tolerance of ambiguity in their answers than the males, with 37%, choosing scores 1 and 2 in answer to this question, perhaps influenced by a term's work which had emphasised grammatical accuracy. Again, traditional notions of learning styles of males and females did not appear to be supported by the questionnaire findings.

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QUESTION FOUR: REFLECTIVITY

Reflectivity, as opposed to impulsivity, can also be important for students working towards improved accuracy in their use of a foreign language. In the group of A level students chosen, observation had suggested that the majority of students were reflective thinkers, whose concern for accuracy could often hinder their willingness to contribute orally. However, this degree of reflectivity can often be a strength when producing written work requiring a high standard of grammatical accuracy. Students who contribute impulsively to class discussions seem to develop confidence orally. Yet in answering questions to which answers are to be found in a written text, these students often prefer to give their own answers, which may be interesting and inventive but may show little or no comprehension of the text. Oxford (1994) comments that females tend to