

Gender Differences and Writing Performance: A Brief Review

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Abstract

In view of the fact that learner-centered instruction is the standpoint in education in new trends, teachers must be aware of students' characteristics in order to tailor their teaching to needs of learners. One of the areas which is closely related to characteristics and performance of language learners is the role of gender on language learning in general and writing performance in particular. Although various studies have been conducted to examine gender difference regarding different aspects of language learning, the results reveal inconsistencies. This paper attempts to consider the gender differences in writing performance and has some implications for policy makers who are to develop a curriculum compatible with the needs of language learners.

Keywords: Gender, sex, English language, writing

1. Introduction

It must be stated that, language, as a means of communication, has a cardinal role in human societies. All the members of a given community don't speak or write in the same way, but each member has his/her own dialectal, sociolectal features of speaking or different styles of writing (Soori & Zamani, 2011). More importantly, language is the collection of culture, civilization, and knowledge and it can be studied from different orientations. One of the important aspects of language features is that they are used differently by males and females. Due to difference in speaking between men and women, they think differently, so they write differently. Thereby, the differences among the men and women in using different language features can be revealed through writing skill and it can give a better understanding of the relationship between language and gender (Soori & Zamani, 2011).

2. Writing Skill

Writing is a system for interpersonal communication using various styles of language (Jalaluddin, 2011). It plays a fundamental role in our personal and professional lives. It allows us to communicate with people who are removed by distance or time. In academia, the skill of writing is visible in conference presentations, journals and book publication through which the transmission of new ideas and concepts is affected (Fatemi, 2008). Moreover, writing skill is important when you consider that writing is almost in every course (Ahmadi, Maftoon, & Gholami Mahrdad, 2012). The importance of writing is much more essential For TEFL students in university settings because students study in English language and must require enough knowledge to write and produce specific writing genres. More to point, that in the 21st century in order to communicate ideas and information effectively in and through global networks, written communication seems vital for learners' success. Thus, the ability to communicate clearly in writing is one of the most important skills of second language learners (Halliday, 2003; Hyland, 2003). Haiwen Mo (2012) also highlights the role of writing as an essential and integral part of English learning and an important skill for undergraduate non-English majors.

3. Gender and Sex

It needs to be said that the words "Gender" and "Sex" are used interchangeably. The difference between these two words has been a frequent topic for debates within researches. People use these two words in daily activities such as filling the questionnaires, medical forms and all official paperwork. These two words seem to be simple and are used to explain some of the basic characteristics of human (Pryzgodna & Chrisler, 2000). Simply, "Sex" has come to refer to the biological aspects of being male or female. "Gender" typically refers only to behavioral, social, and psychological characteristics of men and women (Pryzgodna & Chrisler, 2000). Thereby, when we are talking about sex and gender we think of sex as biological and gender as a social characteristic of human being (Eckert & McConell-Ginet, 2003).

4. Gender and Writing

Language used by people is determined by social classification such as gender, social class, age, ethnicity, education etc. (Muto-Humphrey, 2005). One of the sociocultural factors shaped by learners in the process of learning a language including writing is gender (Kamari, Gorjian, & Pazhakh, 2012). The term "gender" clearly reveals the social and contextual expectations which society puts on part of each gender (male or female) culturally and socially (Kamari et al., 2012). Block (2002) also considers gender as a social phenomenon. Hence, there is a shift in view from perceiving gender as an individual concept to perceiving it as a social construction (Aslan, 2009). One of the factors which seems to be of great importance in dealing with writing and gender is the relationship between second language writing and identity construction. A growing body of research in the second language writing has been conducted on the social nature of writing rather than its individual or autonomous nature (Belcher & Hirvela, 2001). That is, writing is a social activity in which writers align themselves in acceptable discourses to express themselves by reinventing ideas and linguistic expressions created by others (Prior, 2001). In this view, writers' identities are socially constructed and writers position themselves in social identities available to members of the discourse community (Clark & Ivanic, 1997; Ivanic, 1998). Given that gender constitutes part of a writer's multiple identities, investigating how the development of second language writing reflects, affects, or constructs gender identity would provide important insights in educational contexts (Kubota, 2003). It must be noted that the issues of gender in the research fields of second and foreign language education, second language acquisition, and language strategies, language skills have been considered in some recent review articles. Reviewing studies on language and gender in the broader field of second and foreign language education, Sunderland (2000) synthesizes a large number of publications with a wide range of topics, including language learning ability, motivation/investment, teacher perceptions, learning styles and strategies, classroom interaction, teaching materials, testing, learner identities, masculinities, and pedagogies. Taking a close look at the importance of gender and writing relation, it is helpful to state that the second language writing research may explore gender differences in how men and women or boys and girls write differently in L2 with respect to process and product (Kubota, 2003). These differences, however, should not be conceptualized as fixed traits, but as phenomena contingent on context and power. Research on gender difference in the writing process may consider some issues, such as topic choice, planning, writing, peer editing, and revising; on the other hand, as a focus on product, it may also explore word choice, syntax, discourse organization, audience awareness, and so on (Kubota, 2003).

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (as cited in Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004) claim that research on language and gender should:

- explain how social practice relates to linguistic structures and system,
- describe the social construction of gender categories,
- consider theories and approaches from other communities of scholarly practice, especially those specially concerned with gender,
- focus on the particular rather than (over) generalize (p.387).

A growing body of research has been reported that females are better in academic achievement than boys (Camarata & Woodcock, 2006; Gibb, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2008; Marks, 2008; Pajares & Valiante, 2001). In her study on fourth and eighth-grade teachers' and students' perspectives on boys' and girls' relative writing competence, Peterson (2000) reported a superiority of girls' writing over boys' writing and girls' writing was considered as more detailed, descriptive, and having greater conformity to writing conventions. Some studies indicate that girls are more confident in writing than boys (Pajares & Valiante, 2001; Peterson, 2000). Based on some evidence, students' confidence in writing is a predictive factor of their writing competence (Pajares et al., 1999; Pajares & Valiante, 1999).

Numerous studies have been conducted regarding gender and language learning including writing in Iran. Kamari et al., (2012) in their research on 150 BA students of Islamic Azad University of Ahvaz majoring in Teaching English as a foreign Language (TEFL), compared both genders in terms of proficiency in writing descriptive paragraph and their opinion on paragraph. The results showed the superiority of writing skill of male students on opinion paragraph essay and superiority of female students on descriptive one. According to findings of Kamari et al., (2012), males are good writers on opinion related- subjects because of their ability in expressing their opinions and ideas.

The data analysis in the study conducted by Jafari and Ansari (2012) on the effect of collaboration and gender on Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy indicated that the students in the collaborative writing group outperformed

the students in the control group. Moreover, based on data, the females in the collaborative group outperformed males in the same group indicating that gender has a pivotal role in Iranian EFL collaborative writing. In another study conducted by Gorjian et al., (2012), they attempted to find out whether critical thinking instruction affect Iranian EFL male and female students' descriptive writing and if there is a significant gender difference in strategy use in the writing performance. The results showed that critical thinking instruction had a significant effect on improving Iranian EFL students' descriptive writing and there were significant differences on the effective use of critical thinking instructions with regard to gender in descriptive writing test performance. According to Soori and Zamani (2012), students (males and females) use language features (e.g. style of writing) differently. Due to the fact that men and women speak differently in using different language features, they can write differently as well. However, Soori and Zamani (2012) revealed that most language features were used equally by male and female writers. Furthermore, Jones (2007) reported that with regard to composition process and strategies, there is scant evidence to support the notion of boys as weak writers. In addition, Peterson (2000) found that girls tend to see themselves as being successful both in their use of writing conventions and writing description. Boys, in contrast, tend to identify appeal and creativity as their writing strengths.

5. Conclusion

The review of related research in this study aimed to shed light on gender differences in writing. It might be essential for educators to focus more intensely on writing for males in the classroom. It also may be essential for teachers to be aware that more varied learning strategies in writing are pivotal for students, especially male students who are not good in writing. Providing male students with more concrete processes in writing development could improve their learning strategies in writing. In addition, boys with higher motivation perform better than those who are poorly motivated in writing, so it is potential for educators to concentrate on students' motivation as a more indirect influence on student outcomes. Moreover, policy makers have to address gender inequities between boys and girls in academic settings and provide equal learning environment and resources.

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