

How do gender and social identity impact acquiring a second language? 🔍

Background

Social identity is how you perceive yourself and what you are trying to display. However, more importantly, it's how others view you. Social identity is intertwined with everything we do. We are always either consciously or unconsciously categorizing the people that we interact with. Some things that we may notice when meeting someone new is their clothing, gender, ethnicity/race, and/or perceived social status.

We all constantly "perform" our social identity. Depending on the situation, we will act differently. For example, most of us will speak and behave differently around our parents opposed to our friends. "Interactional sociolinguists believe that social identity and ethnicity are in large part established and maintained through language."⁴

However, identity is not static. We are constantly shifting our identities. Perceptions of gender and social identity are fluid and ever-changing.

In recent years, society has held a spotlight on gender and social identity, especially in light of fourth-wave feminism. This has rippled into seemingly unrelated fields, such as linguistics. However, social identity, including gender, is undoubtedly a huge set of factors involved in second language acquisition and the successes (or failures) of L2 learners. Choosing to ignore these factors in research and considerations leaves us drawing conclusions which aren't based on the whole picture.

“Rather than seeing gender as an individual variable, we see it as a complex system of social relations and discursive practices, differentially constructed in local contexts... we recognize that gender, as one of many important facets of social identity, interacts with race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, age, and social status in framing students' language learning experiences, trajectories, and outcomes.”⁶

Stereotyping and Language

One major stereotype in SLA within the topic of gender is that language learning is “for women” or that women are better at learning languages than men. However, there is very little to back this up. Culturally, we tend to divide things into gendered categories. Research says that “based on the notion of gender as a differentiating variable, such quests to find differences between male and female learners have not shown clear-cut patterns of differential achievement—yet the belief in female superiority in language learning is more widespread than attempts to argue for male superiority in accomplishing the same task.”⁷

Research even shows that, contrary to this stereotype, men typically score higher on language tests than women do. One study revealed an advantage for men, “in yet another small study, this one on the impact of raters, Caroll (1991) found that male raters gave candidates higher scores than female raters did; and both male and female raters gave male candidates higher scores than they did female candidates.”¹

Another reason we might stereotype girls as better at languages is rate of investment and enrollment. It is true that, typically, girls have higher enrollment rates in foreign language classes. One reason for this may be motivation—“girls who choose to continue with languages have been found to be significantly more likely to do so on the grounds of ‘perceived usefulness’ than boys.”⁸

Gender Preference in Education

Male students are often given more attention in classrooms than female students. It was seen in an observational self-study by Dale Spender of her own classroom that, even though she thought she was giving each gender equal attention, she had in fact still spent more time interacting with her male students. On top of this, the male students still felt neglected, despite having greater attention paid to them.²

“All these studies assumed that the lack of attention granted to girls had an unfavorable impact on their education. The scholars, however, did not hold teachers responsible. According to Brophy and Good, for example, they were ‘not the case of the differences in the way males and females behave in the classroom and out: Rather, students enter the classroom with differences already inculcated in them by their families and by society, which their teachers then perpetuate.’”²

Many adult women will continue to struggle receiving an education. There are many reasons for this, such as cultural differences or societal views. For example, a study on immigrant women students showed that they struggled with various barriers such as getting permission from husbands to attend classes, feeling unsafe attending classes at night, or needing to bring children with to class. “Women are placed at a further disadvantage in literacy programs that do not consider gender-based differences in acculturation, cognitive development, and learning styles. Women's empowerment may even be minimized in programs designed primarily to promote family literacy because they often place the locus of responsibility for family literacy problems on the woman herself.”³

Impact on Language Acquisition

As an educator, it is extremely important to consider these factors while designing and teaching curriculum. The above barriers and impacts placed on women and men, such as

- Negative stereotypes
- Gender inequalities
- and lack of opportunities

may affect students' success in acquiring a second language.

“Japan-born female learners and their foreign-born English instructors share a belief that English ability gives women an edge in their careers and helps them achieve greater economic independence in a sexist job market. Activist teachers and students alike hope Japan-born women will use English itself as a toll for resisting their marginalization as non-native English-speaking women of color in international discourse.”⁵

We must treat these challenges as if our students' lives depend on it—because they do. Access (or lack thereof) to language acquisition opportunities can affect students socially and economically.

When we make something part of our identity, like learning another language, we tend to do everything we can to uphold that image. Making a language and culture part of our identity can greatly aid a learner in acquiring a second language. The identity-change and cultural aspects that come with language learning can provide students opportunities that might not have been possible before. Learning a language is not just acquiring new knowledge or a new skill, it changes who we are, in a way.

Conclusion

It is of the utmost importance to remove learners from an abstract environment in research and consider real factors that are a part of their everyday lives. After all, it seems highly unlikely that any learner is placing themselves into an isolation chamber to learn a language. Language learners weave their learning into their complex, unique daily lives. Gender and social identity are major key factors to consider when discussing the acquisition of a second language.

Beyond adult outreach programs, we have the option to emphasize women's opportunities and to teach feminism in primary and secondary school ESL classrooms.

It is the responsibility of current and future ESL educators to pass on and uphold a message of equality, for the greater good of our students. It's not just to better the world but to increase opportunities for our students, whose successes should be of our greatest interests.

Sources

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