

## AN INVESTIGATION OF RESEARCH ON GENDER AND LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES: WHAT IS THE MESSAGE FOR THE CLASSROOM TEACHER?

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### ABSTRACT.

*This study synthesizes the research on gender and language learning that looks specifically at issues concerning learner strategies, in an attempt to elicit whether there is enough information to support the assumption that females are indeed better language learners than males. On the basis of this synthesis, the author emphasizes equal opportunity of success, regardless of the learners' sex, and argues for an informative and practical position on the question of potential gender differences in strategy use for language teachers in practice, highlighting the need for the integration of successful strategy instruction into language classes and curricula.*

**Key Words:** Learning Strategies, Language Learning, Language Education, Gender Differences, Sex Differences, Strategy Instruction.

### ÖZET.

*Bu çalışma, kız öğrencilerin dil öğrenmede erkeklere oranla daha başarılı oldukları varsayımını desteklemek için yeterli sayıda bilgi olup olmadığını ortaya koymak amacıyla, cinsiyet ve dil öğrenimi alanında özellikle öğrenme stratejilerine odaklı araştırmaları incelemektedir. Yazar, yapılan sentez doğrultusunda, öğrencilerin cinsiyeti ne olursa olsun eşit öğrenme imkanlarının yaratılmasının önemini vurgulamakta, ve strateji kullanımında cinsiyetler arasındaki potansiyel farklılıklar konusunda aktif olarak görev yapan yabancı dil öğretmenlerine yönelik aydınlatıcı ve pratiğe yönelik bir yaklaşımı desteklemektedir. Bunun ışığında, strateji eğitiminin dil dersleri ve müfredatlarına eklenmesinin gerekliliğinin altı çizilmektedir.*

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Öğrenme Stratejileri, Öğrenme Stilleri, Dil Öğrenimi, Dil Eğitimi, Cinsiyet Farklılıkları, Strateji Eğitimi, Strateji Öğretimi.

## INTRODUCTION

The focus in language education over the past few decades has gradually shifted from the teacher and teaching strategies to the learner and learning strategies. How learners look at and work with the task of learning languages and what types of strategies they utilize to process the new information has become a popular area of research. This trend has been instigated by several concerns, the most significant of which was identifying what good language learners do, and what they report they do respectively. Many researchers (i.e., Rubin, 1975; O'Malley et al., 1985) believed that the answer to this question would yield a grand opportunity for less efficient language learners to learn and replicate the strategies exercised by more successful language learners, so that they could enhance their language skills. Early attempts to explore 'the good language learner' brought about lists of strategies assumed to be vital in maintaining success in language learning. For instance, Rubin's (1975) list, based on interviews with and observations of both teachers and learners, included being a willing learner and an accurate guesser, having a strong drive to communicate, focusing on form by looking for patterns, taking advantage of all practice opportunities, monitoring your own speech as well as that of others, and paying attention to meaning. Such efforts to characterize the good language learner (i.e., Rubin, 1975; Naiman et al., 1975; Stern 1975) then opened the stage for many researchers to classify language learning strategies by means of various criteria (i.e., direct or indirect contribution to learning - Rubin, 1981; practiced in the classroom, in individual study, or during interaction with others - Politzer, 1983; cognitive or metacognitive - O'Malley et al., 1985). No matter what categorizations were used, the recurrent conviction in the body of research in this area has always been that more effective language learners devise and use a wider variety of strategies, and in more effective ways than the other learners (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1993). This information brought with itself another major question, why these individual differences existed in strategy use, and what factors had an influence on the strategies language learners selected and used. Gender, the core of this paper, has proven to be one of the factors researchers commonly looked at, along with several others, such as, but not limited to, motivation, language proficiency, age, cultural background, and type of language learning tasks involved. However, the conflicting nature of the results in regard to gender is just another call for further research.

### **DOES THE LEARNERS' GENDER<sup>1</sup> REALLY MATTER?**

Several studies in the literature support the notion that gender, significant or not, made a difference in learning a second or foreign language (i.e., Politzer, 1983; Oxford et al., 1988; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Oxford et al., 1993; Oxford and Ehrman, 1995). The majority of studies examining gender as a variable affecting the use of language learning strategies reported recurring differences between males and females, demonstrating more frequent strategy use by females. In an exploratory study of self-reported language learning behaviors and their relationship to achievement, Politzer (1983) indicated that females use social learning strategies significantly more than males. Although the difference was deemed to be relatively minor, the conclusion was that it did "exist with regard to such variables as social interaction" (p. 62). Oxford, Nyikos and Ehrman (1988), supporting Politzer's observation, asserted, based on previous research, that it is reasonable to think that females are better at social orientation, and consequently, at communication in both their first and second languages (verbal learning). They reasoned that social learning strategies (techniques involving at least one other person), which females seemed to use more often than males, increased the amount of interaction with native speakers, enhanced motivation, and, thus, were particularly important for exposing the learner to the target language. In their study of adult learners, using a sample of "relatively sophisticated adult language learners," Ehrman and Oxford (1989) examined learning strategies in relation to sex differences, career choice (and the underlying motivation it implies), cognitive style, and aspects of personality, and their findings showed that women definitely reported greater strategy use than men. For Ehrman and Oxford (1989), the significant advantage females appeared to have in four areas (general study strategies, function practice strategies, strategies for searching for and communicating meaning, and self-management/metacognitive strategies) could be attributed to psychological type, as females in their study, unlike men, favored intuition over sensing and showed preference for feeling, which is statistically associated with a superiority in general strategies and a suggestive advantage in social strategies. They further added that, in addition to the psychological type, variables such as female dominance in verbal aptitude and social orientation, as well as possible sex differences in integrative (socially-based) motivation, could well play a role in the difference between males and females. In a later study, Oxford (1989) synthesized existing research on factors influencing the choice of learning strategies among L2

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<sup>1</sup> *There is a large body of research in several disciplines discussing what gender means, and whether gender and sex are dichotomous terms or substitutes for each other. This paper will not take part in this debate, and will use both terms interchangeably, corresponding to different language learning strategy researchers' own usage of these two terms.*

learners up to that point, and demonstrated sex and ethnicity as the main determinants of strategy use.

Despite the consensus on reported differences of strategy use between males and females in these studies, several researchers seemed uncertain about what caused the differences between the sexes. Correspondingly, Oxford and Crookall (1989) surveyed research on language learning strategies, and they confirmed that there was growing evidence of sex differences in language learning strategy use based on the previous research, while they still did not have the answers to whether these differences were consistent over many studies, and what the reasons for such differences were (i.e., socio-cultural expectations, genetic inheritance, or some combination). They stated that what such differences had to say about assumptions concerning 'good learner characteristics' was just an addition to the list of 'what we do not yet know.'

In one of the largest, if not the largest, completed study of language learning strategies in terms of the number of participants involved, Oxford and Nyikos (1989) investigated the variables affecting choice of learning strategies used by 1,200 foreign language students in a conventional academic setting, a major university in the United States. Findings indicated that the degree of expressed motivation was the single most powerful influence on the choice of language learning strategies and that gender, along with other variables such as proficiency ratings, elective/required status, years of study, and major/career orientation, had a profound effect on strategy choice. Gender was especially noteworthy for formal rule-related practice strategies, general study strategies and conversational input elicitation strategies, as females reported more frequent strategy use than males in these three categories, while males reported no more frequent strategy use than females in any category. Although females did not opt for functional practice (authentic language use) strategies significantly more often than men (despite the prevalent expectation, due to their supposedly stronger social orientation), Oxford and Nyikos (1989) elucidated that, "in this sample, everyone's use of such strategies appeared to be suppressed by the traditional, academic environment of the classroom—a setting which promotes and rewards performance on discrete tasks rather than interactive, communicative efforts" (p. 297). Thus, it was not surprising to find out that the students reported employing strategies they would benefit from in a traditional, structure-oriented, foreign language learning environment geared toward completion of formal assignments and succeeding in tests, and that they would ignore the strategies which involved an extracurricular effort to communicate in the new language (functional practice strategies) or that required working independently on mnemonic or metacognitive aspects (resourceful, independent strategies). Oxford and Nyikos (1989) advocated that

females' greater report of use of conversational input elicitation strategies in this study reflected their power in social interaction, and their report of more frequent use of general study strategies and formal rule-related practice strategies could be related to their verbal superiority, and/or their willingness to conform to conventional norms and their desire for social approval. Adding an analogous viewpoint, a promising study of individual differences reflected in the memorization processes of adult language learners by Nyikos (1990), suggested that socialization factors, how males and females value certain modalities differently, account for the gender differences in processing similar information in diverse ways. Results of her study on five recall measures revealed that females recalled vocabulary significantly better under one study condition, and most successfully under another. Nyikos (1990) commented that the finding that women scored higher with color as a mediator and that men's ability to recall was significantly improved with visual-spatial stimulus (color-plus-picture) may stem from a gender-related tendency to utilize specific types of learning strategies. She concluded that such achievement differences, when statistically linked to gender, may reflect women's willingness to apply an assigned learning strategy while taking into consideration the stated criteria for success, what she called "reading the teacher's standards better" (p. 285). For Nyikos (1990), men, on the other hand, tend to view grades as rewards for successful competition and do not interpret them as signs of social approval and are less likely to abide by the rules and declared academic standards, which consequently might explain why female language learners have better grades and appear to be more successful in school.

In a study of foreign language listening skills, Bacon's (1992) analysis of adult learners' reports of comprehension strategies, comprehension level, confidence, and affective response to two authentic Spanish radio broadcasts found gender differences in comprehension strategy use and perceived confidence level. Men and women reported using different strategies depending on both passage order and passage difficulty, and these variations in strategy use had no significant effect on comprehension, though women reported less confidence and less positive affective response than men. Passage difficulty had a significantly greater effect on the level of affective response of women than of men. The women in this study reported using a significantly higher proportion of metacognitive strategies, and were more likely to adjust that usage when passage difficulty demanded it. Interestingly, men responded to passage difficulty by varying their cognitive, rather than metacognitive strategies. Women were more likely to plan for listening, monitor their comprehension, and evaluate their strategy use. Men appeared to bypass the planning and monitoring aspects in favor of a direct cognitive approach. Although the interaction between gender and passage was not reported to be significant, Bacon (1992)

suggested that one should note the strong tendency of women to react to the more difficult passage with a greater report of metacognitive strategies.

Unlike most studies that researched language classes taught by a single teacher in a conventional classroom setting, Oxford, Park-Oh, Ito, and Sumrali (1993) explored the influence of various learner characteristics on success in satellite-delivered language classes. They reported that gender differences in strategy use, with female means always higher, were almost statistically significant for three strategy groups; cognitive strategies, social strategies, and affective strategies. In two of the other strategy groups, memory and metacognitive strategies, female means were slightly higher than male means, but the difference was not statistically significant, whereas male and female means were equal for compensation strategies. One remarkable finding mentioned was that no variables, other than gender, had a nearly significant influence on the frequency of use of different strategies in the study. These results, though not too strongly, followed patterns of gender differences found repeatedly in the previously mentioned studies. In another study with comparable findings, Oxford and Ehrman (1995) examined the relationship between language learning strategies and factors such as proficiency, teacher perceptions, gender, aptitude, learning style, personality, and motivation among 520 adults studying various languages at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), and reported that "significant strategy-related gender differences favoring females were slim, but definitely present" (p. 379). Only a few major differences in strategy use appeared by gender in the study: Compensation strategy use was linked to gender (based on a T-test), with females using more compensation strategies than men, and, in addition, females scored higher on overall strategy use via the average of all the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990, p. 293-300) subscale scores. Oxford and Ehrman (1995) suggested that the weak, while positive, relationship between gender and strategy use in their study was potentially due to the precise nature of the group under examination, as the FSI subjects were believed to be dissimilar to many other language learning populations. Similarly, building on prior research using the SILL and relating strategy use to L2 proficiency level and gender, Green and Oxford (1995) reported on a study of 374 students at the University of Puerto Rico. Like previous researchers, they found greater use of learning strategies among learners deemed to be more successful, and higher levels of strategy use by women than men; however, with both proficiency and gender, only some items on the SILL showed significant variation. They concluded by suggesting two implications of the study for the classroom teacher: First, strategies involving active use of the target language appear to play a crucial role in second language learning. Second, teachers need to recognize that particular strategies may be more suited to some

learners than to others. As opposed to the end results and consensus of most of the studies mentioned so far, Poole (2005), in a recent study of gender differences in reading strategy use among ESL college students, revealed the momentous similarities of strategy use between males and females. For the researcher, this meant that language learners, regardless of their gender, drew from the same strategies in order to achieve the common goal of all learners; namely, to attain a higher L2 reading proficiency in that context.

There are also several other significant studies of language learning strategies from diverse contexts. Kaylani (1996), for instance, examined the influence of gender and motivation on EFL learning strategy use of high school students in Jordan, and confirmed that both gender and motivation had a significant impact on the strategy use, and that females reported more frequent use of strategies. However, in a study discussing learning strategies used by 99 Arabic-speaking English majors at a college in Palestine, Shmais (2003) found contradictory results, with no gender influence present on strategy use. She believed that the diverse findings between these two studies could be attributed to the differences between the student groups, especially to their incongruent proficiency levels. In another study that found no major gender differences on strategy use, Grace (2000) investigated the effect of first language translations on males and females who were beginning French students in a computer assisted language learning (CALL) class, and specifically looked to see 1) whether men and women would benefit equally from a CALL environment that either provided L1 translations at the dialogue level or made limited use of L2 and did not provide dialogue-level translations in L1, when the goal was vocabulary learning, and 2) whether there were differences in how much time males and females spent looking up translations. Analyses indicated that, when students were given a bilingual multiple-choice test, there were no significant differences between males and females on their short-term (immediately after the lesson) or long term (two weeks after the lesson) retention test scores. In addition, there were no significant differences in the amount of time males and females spent looking up translations. Grace (2000) argued that, based on the findings, males and females benefit equally from a CALL environment that makes meaning clear to the learner, and students in such a setting should be free to select their preferred modes of learning. Further, in a study that examined the gender differences in cognitive and metacognitive strategy use of 384 Thai university students in the context of an EFL test, Phakiti (2003) not only found no gender effect on the reading comprehension performance and the use of cognitive strategies, but also, surprisingly, observed males reporting significantly higher use of metacognitive strategies than females. She declared that the L2 learners in this study were all from the same age group, had a relatively small range of English proficiency levels, shared the same cultural and

educational context and exhibited an overall homogeneity, and thus could differ from the participants in previous studies, thereby explaining the inconsistent findings. Another study with even more unanticipated findings was carried out by Tercanlioglu (2004), who investigated strategy use among 184 pre-service EFL teachers at a Turkish university. The results showed gender differences, noticeably favoring males. Tercanlioglu indicated that the unpredictable results could be caused by the fact that female students, in the male-dominated Turkish society, may have lower self-esteem in reporting the strategies they use. She further pointed out to the learners' cultural background and the educational setting in which they are exposed to the target language, as they are an indispensable part of the choice of learning strategies, as discussed by previous research (i.e., Oxford, 1989; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Green and Oxford, 1995).

The majority of the studies discussed above used the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990, p. 293-300), a self-report survey of preferred language learning strategies, despite some limitations in SILL-based studies on gender (i.e., their tendency to look at broad patterns of strategy use-see Green and Oxford, 1995; and their focus on perceived, context-free, strategy use-see Chavez, 2001). Only a handful of studies looked at gender differences in actual strategy use in specific L2 settings. For instance, Vandergrift (1997) employed think-aloud protocols to study gender differences in listening strategy use among 21 high school learners of French, and found that there were very few differences when reported strategy use in the given listening tasks for all male and all female participants were compared. Females used slightly more metacognitive strategies than males, whereas males used more cognitive strategies than females. However, Vandergrift did not establish a relationship between gender differences in strategy use and differences in listening performance. In another study looking at the actual practice, Young and Oxford (1997) investigated strategy use by 23 males and females in processing text in both their L1 (English) and L2 (Spanish). The students' reading comprehension was assessed in open-ended oral recall protocols. They were also asked to report their comprehension level and use of background knowledge. Young and Oxford (1997) discovered that males and females did not differ from one another significantly in the comprehension of the three passages. They also found no significant overall differences in strategy use between males and females. However, males reported monitoring their reading pace, reading strategies, and paraphrasing strategies more often than females on one L2 passage. Females, by contrast, tried to solve vocabulary problems and acknowledged their lack of background knowledge more often than males. Young and Oxford concluded that gender-based differences in strategic

behavior might not reside in general categories, but rather at the level of specific strategies, as some strategies might be gender-related.

In conclusion, though questionable, several researchers showed major differences between males and females in the use of language learning strategies, with women's overall dominance in frequency and range of strategies. Whether females were found to report greater use of cognitive strategies (i.e., Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Oxford, Park-Oh, Ito and Sumrall, 1993) or metacognitive strategies (i.e., Oxford, Nyikos and Ehrman, 1988; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989; Bacon 1992; Green and Oxford, 1995; Kaylani, 1996), it still remains a major concern that the differences portrayed in these studies may not even be factual, since these studies dealt with perceived strategy use, not the actual strategy use in context. Furthermore, one may argue that the similar results repeated in the majority of language learning strategy studies mentioned above may have been shaped by the instrument, the Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL), itself, not by the substantiating facts. Hence, the more frequent use of immediate retrospective accounts rather than self-report questionnaires (i.e., the SILL) in future research could be helpful in reaching more reliable findings (Bacon 1992).

### **A PRACTICAL VIEW OF RESEARCH ON GENDER AND STRATEGY USE**

What do these studies and their findings mean to the classroom teacher? What should the classroom teacher be doing or be worried about in terms of potential gender differences in strategy use, or language learning in general? These are some of the questions language strategy research has overlooked, while countless time and effort have been spent trying to establish that differences do or do not exist.

As Ehrman and Oxford (1988) stated, the understanding of variables affecting strategy use contributes to "better insight into the 'black box' of second language acquisition" and to "language teaching and student counseling" (p. 263). If males and females do indeed differ in strategy use, It is crucial to identify the differences for the purpose of creating an awareness of how gender can affect development and achievement in L2 and for enabling language teachers to use this awareness to help their students of either gender to succeed to their fullest potential. Yet, it is also important to note that several factors interfere with teachers' awareness of students' use of learning strategies. For instance, Nyikos (1990) listed the following factors as barriers for teachers to fully understand and examine the strategies used by their students: "1) foreign language classrooms with large numbers of students; 2) little, if any, elicitation of learning strategies from students; 3) teacher-dominated

classrooms; 4) the competitive, non-cooperative type of learning inherent in the grade-oriented educational system; and 5) lack of personalized interaction between teacher and learner during the learning process" (p. 278). Although teachers may not have control over some of these issues (i.e., large classes) due to their lack of decision-making power in so many settings, they can play an important role in students' success by creating opportunities for a communicative, comfortable, and cooperative learning environment, one that is tailored for each and every student and their needs. It will then be feasible for the classroom teacher to better see, evaluate, and understand the strategies used by the students and the assumptions underlying them. Accordingly, continued research looking specifically at gender in language learning strategy use, as well as research that can add to understanding of specific conditions and variables that influence males' and females' learning, should be encouraged. However, as Nyikos (1990) asserted, one should remember that "any study of gender-related differences must acknowledge that the effect of the sex variable is dependent on the task performed and the circumstances under which the task is carried out" (p. 274). In this regard, "gender differences should be interpreted very strictly in their specific contexts" (Phakiti, 2003, p. 679), and conclusions based solely on gender, regardless of several other variables such as, but not limited to, motivation, proficiency level, and age, need to be considered with caution. It should be kept in mind that there is more to learners than just their gender, and generalizations based on dichotomous gender types may be misleading. Furthermore, "the belief in gender differences as a universal phenomenon should be disregarded" (Phakiti, 2003, p. 679), as supported by the conflicting results of the studies on gender and strategy use presented above. Although it can be argued that the variation in results could be attributed, to some extent, to the absence of a shared strategy classification system and to the disagreements on the definitions of various strategies (Oxford and Crookall, 1989; Oxford and Ehrman, 1995) or to the specific skills examined in different studies (Phakiti, 2003), it would not be an overstatement to say that even research reporting gender differences did not make a strong case to support a rigid cause-and-effect link between gender and strategy use. In light of this, while establishing gender differences as a universal phenomenon in L2 learning and strategy use seems helpful and easy for researchers to compare findings across contexts (Phakiti, 2003), we, for the sake of language teaching practice, should, after all, be more interested in finding out 'why,' 'in what conditions' and 'how' gender differences in strategy use, if any, exist, rather than just reiterating that they do or do not exist. Looking for answers to these questions, and linking the theory to actual practice, requires a set of skills and practical behaviors performed as part of a teacher in action's responsibilities, discussed below collectively as *strategy instruction*.

### **Strategy instruction**

Language strategy research has long supported the view that there is no single strategy pattern used by effective language learners, and that successful language learners use a selection of strategies, matching those strategies to their individual needs and requirements and to the demands of the task (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Oxford, 1990; Oxford and Ehrman, 1995). In other words, optimal learners, regardless of their gender, work towards developing a blend of strategies that are appropriate for and effective in specific contexts. The use of appropriate learning strategies enables students to take charge of their own learning by enhancing learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989), all of which are vital in keeping the learners motivated to learn even outside of the formal classroom environment (Oxford and Crookall, 1989). In this regard, it appears to be extremely important that language teachers learn to identify and comprehend what strategies are applied in various activities by male and female students, and that their learning is facilitated by making them aware of the range of strategies from which they can choose through informed strategy training. Unlike most other characteristics of the learner, such as aptitude, motivation, personality, and general cognitive styles, learning strategies are teachable. Therefore, teachers can help learners of both sexes with their progress in learning the language by effectively incorporating learning strategy instruction into regular classrooms. Several studies in the literature (i.e., Nyikos, 1990; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Rubin and Thompson, 1994; Oxford and Ehrman, 1995) advocated that strategy training, teaching language learners how and why to use, transfer, and evaluate strategies, can have a powerful effect in helping learners self-diagnose their strengths and weaknesses in language learning, develop a variety of problem-solving skills, monitor and self-evaluate their performance, make thriving decisions about how to handle different language learning tasks, and transfer or adapt the strategies that work in some contexts to others; thus, take responsibility of their own learning, as emphasized above.

The teacher's role in strategy training is imperative. Teachers generally do not know which strategies their students are using, unless they conduct some kind of formal or informal research (Oxford and Crookall, 1989). Therefore, it is critical that teachers learn about their students and take into consideration various factors besides their gender, such as their interests, motivation, aptitude, proficiency level and learning styles, as well as the nature of the language tasks involved in strategy training, so that they can help students identify their current learning strategies. Teachers should be attentive in observing their students' behaviors and the language learning strategies they appear to be using in class, and seek to uncover numerous issues, such as, but not limited to, whether they prefer working alone or collaborating with other

students, and if and when they use a variety of techniques ranging from clarification to guessing, and from deductive reasoning to memorizing and monitoring. Additionally, teachers can employ a number of methods including surveys, individual and group interviews, diaries, and think-alouds to enrich their in-class observations and obtain further information about their students. It is extremely likely that even learners of the same gender within the same classroom may have different learning styles and wide-ranging awareness of the use of strategies. As previous research (i.e., Nyikos, 1990; Oxford and Ehrman, 1995) suggested, teachers should understand that gender differences may often be a mask for deeper differences (i.e., different socialization, personality type), and males and females should be provided with a variety of strategies to accommodate their unique needs and preferences, so that they can overcome their disadvantages and develop the most effective learning approaches to flourish equally in the language. Language teachers, rather than forming normative judgments and/or preconceptions based on gender, should embrace the differences between male and female students, and provide the students with strategy instruction containing strategies that are in tune with their learning style. To illustrate, the suggestion of incorporating color and color-and-picture into the repertoire of learning strategies during regular language instruction after the significant results observed when color was used as a mnemonic strategy by women and color-and-picture by men in the Nyikos (1990) study, signifies this fact. Such practice will also ensure equal chances of success for each gender group, no matter if males and females present unique and different ways of doing and learning. As Nyikos (1990) affirmed, "allowing for individual modalities and cognitive/learning styles to operate in the foreign language learning process can clearly yield beneficial results, if students can choose from a wide range of learning strategies provided through learning strategy instruction" (p. 285). Similarly, research indicated that after strategy training, males and females show roughly equivalent, though different strategy strengths (Oxford et al., 1998). Since both men and women appear to have the potential to achieve similarly when provided with a wide array of learning strategies and the opportunity to follow their own road to success (Nyikos, 1990), pushing language learners into a gender-stereotyped set of strategies will only create inequalities in and outside of the language classroom and will serve as barriers to learning the language.

A key issue in strategy instruction is whether it is carried out in an implicit or explicit way, or both. According to research, effective strategy training is usually highly explicit instead of being implicitly-embedded (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Cohen, 1998). Furthermore, although there are some disagreements, strategy training that works is not only overt, but is often believed to be integrated into regular classroom activities over a long period of

time, rather than serving as a separate course or part of a course in a limited time frame, and provides plenty of practice with varied L2 tasks involving authentic materials (Cohen, 1998). Thus, successful strategy instruction goes beyond the teaching of strategies, and encompasses crucial planning and organization for teachers in practice. Language teachers should analyze the classroom texts and tasks to find out whether they include an assortment of language learning strategies and their practice, and look for supplementary materials, if needed. Additionally, teachers should reflect on their own teaching methods, beliefs, and overall classroom style, to make sure that one gender group is not at an advantage. It should be noted that the classroom climate set by the teaching style and beliefs about learning potential exert differential influences on male and female students (Nyikos, 1990), and thus, terminates the efforts to make the language classroom an equal opportunity setting for learners. Analyzing their practices will also help teachers determine whether the learners are given the chance to use a variety of learning styles and strategies, and whether they are allowed to approach the task at hand in different ways. It should be emphasized that evaluating self and following the route of reflective teaching in strategy instruction will make it possible for teachers to be better prepared to focus on language learning strategies and strategy training during teaching.

Another important issue in strategy instruction and gender is concerned with affective factors and effectively dealing with them. Language learning strategy research clearly showed that determining how the individuals' language learning strategies correlate with factors, such as gender, has implications for creating profiles for diagnosis, prediction and student counseling (Ehrman and Oxford, 1988; Oxford and Ehrman, 1995). Males and females interpret and respond to the classroom environment and tasks in different ways (Nyikos, 1990) and females, in contrast to males, may develop signs of worry and low self-esteem in the language classroom. As the synthesis of previous research in gender and language strategy use revealed, especially females develop anxiety that is not necessarily due to their lack of capabilities or insufficient skills, but is an outcome of their misperception of abilities and 'self' (Bacon, 1992). Thus, teachers should help female students by creating a classroom climate where promotion of one gender over another (i.e., teacher-fronted classrooms favoring males) is avoided, and fairness and equity between genders is established. Affective issues such as anxiety, attitudes, motivation, beliefs and interests, should be directly addressed in class by language teachers, as part of the strategy training. Teachers should design materials and tasks that incorporate an understanding of strategic capabilities of each gender, so that they can feel confident and motivated, and not neglected. For example, in a reading class, choosing a text that would interest males, as well as females, rather than

selecting a sports passage that will stereotypically favor only males, would be essential. Such an approach will not only raise an awareness of appropriate choice and use of strategies for students, but also enforce the ideal for equal opportunities for success, and provide openings, particularly for females, to learn to accurately judge their metacognitive skills, as well as their progress and learning. As Bacon (1992) stated, this will then accompany an objective self-assessment of females' strategy use, which is the key to success in applying the proper strategies in each specific context in an effective way.

Similarly, foreign language classrooms should accommodate the needs of male learners, and encourage them to cooperate with other learners, so that they can improve social interaction to enhance their learning. Language teachers should constantly analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of strategy instruction, and in cases where additional support is needed by each gender, should be willing to provide the students with further opportunities to reduce their anxiety, build confidence, and/or collaborate with others. Since language learners are not usually attentive to their own feelings and social relationships as part of the L2 learning process, possibly caused by the reluctance of L2 researchers to explore these behaviors frequently (Oxford 1990), it is advisable that language teachers stress the importance of these aspects, along with the cognitive and metacognitive skills, and assume their role as 'teachers as counselors.'

Finally, implementing strategy instruction in the language classroom and systematically introducing and emphasizing learning strategies in classroom activities to help students improve their learning requires that teachers have a foundation in strategy instruction. Although no empirical evidence is present to determine a single best method for strategy training (Oxford and Crookall, 1989), several instructional frameworks were introduced over the years. For instance, Oxford et al. (1990) outlined a course of action that can be taken to successfully teach strategies, which emphasized explicit strategy awareness, discussion of the benefits of strategy use, functional and contextualized practice with the strategies chosen, self-evaluation and monitoring of language performance, and suggestions for or demonstrations of the transferability of the strategies to new tasks and contexts. Chamot and O'Malley (1994), on the other hand, developed a sequence that underlined problem-solving in four stages: planning, monitoring, problem solving, and evaluation. Classroom teachers need to familiarize themselves with and receive training in these and other frameworks and instructional models that have been developed and implemented in various educational settings and that have established a link between theories and current language teaching practice (i.e., Video-taped mini

courses by Rubin, 1996; the Strategies-Based Instruction adopted by Cohen, 1998), before they can effectively lead strategy training.

### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

The focal point in this study was the alleged tie between language learning strategies and the learner characteristics of gender. It is evident that language learners utilize, or report using, an assortment of strategies, and those strategies facilitate the learners' progress in a foreign language. However, founded on a number of studies vigilantly scrutinized, it would be far from being an understatement to declare that the effect of gender on language learning strategy use is full of loopholes. Yet, the existing evidence in the literature in favor of, for instance, the degree of difference in strategy use contingent on proficiency level is far more convincing. The message such assertions convey to practicing language educators is as plain as the nose on one's face. The teachers should not view, or concentrate exclusively on, gender as a determining or decisive factor by itself on strategy use, and ultimately, on one's success in language learning. In other words, treating gender as a hallmark alone is risky, as it sends out the wrong message to all involved in language teaching and learning that learners have innate, predetermined advantages or drawbacks concerning their performance and skills, and uneven chances of success due to their gender. This is not to say that no discrepancies exist between the genders whatsoever in terms of language learning practices or that any likely differences between males and females should be disregarded; however, one should recognize that they are not entirely carved-in-stone, and their extent and magnitude may drastically fluctuate when such differences interact with other factors (i.e., proficiency level, age, learning style, and motivation) and take place in myriad unique classrooms and circumstances. Furthermore, though it is rather typical that not all language learners use identical successful language learning strategies, it is also true that students, irrespective of gender, can be trained in using the ones that prove to be superior, or in developing a selection of other strategies that will work for them to become victorious language learners.

Consequently, strategy instruction, though not a recent trend, was brought up and discussed in this study as the primary message classroom teachers should infer from the research on gender and language learning strategies, as it was deemed to be the most appropriate answer to the question raised in the title of this investigation. What occurs in strategy instruction, in general terms, is that "the teacher first identifies or shows students how to identify their current language strategies, explains the rationale and application for using additional learning strategies, provides opportunities and materials for practice, and evaluates or assists students to evaluate their degree of success

with new learning strategies (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990, p. 157). As the dialogue above with reference to the previous research reveals, such training should not be founded solely on gender and should revolve around the notion that, teachers, as much as they should be mindful about gender differences, need to make sure that the classroom environment, tasks and instruction serve equally for needs, interests and strengths of both gender groups to bring about their potential, and disclose their power, and at the same time, conceal their limitations.

Teachers can take diverse initiatives and employ a variety of schemes to introduce strategy training to their students of both genders to benefit equally. First, learning a foreign language, as anticipated, may differ from learning other academic subjects, and may require different skills or the same skills tailored to needs of foreign language learners. It would not be surprising for most, if not all, language teachers to encounter students who do exceptionally well, say in math or sciences, but fail in language classes, or vice versa. Thus, it is critical that language teachers take the time, especially during the very first several classes, to discuss in what ways language study is unique, why certain skills (i.e., managing anxiety) are rather necessary to its nature, and how general study skills students have long established (i.e., note-taking) can be used and would be more effective in the language classroom. With lower-level students, this can even be carried out in part or largely in their native tongue to ensure comprehension and to reduce the initial unease. The next essential element is creating awareness of strategy use, its significance and training, and in doing so, promoting alert and responsive learners. Teachers, based on the characteristics of their students and the nature of their specific contexts, may choose to familiarize the students and add to their practice of effective strategy use in various ways, such as, but not limited to, through modeling the strategies themselves at the outset, providing basic steady explanations regarding strategies and their implications, creating systematic openings for guided or self-regulating practice of a broad range of strategies, and endorsing self-monitoring, analytical thinking and self-appraisal of their effectiveness in individualized milieus. Especially novel teachers, in this fairly compound and potentially tedious process, can follow the lead of a previously established instruction model, such as Strategies-Based Instruction (Cohen, 1998) and adapt it in accordance with the needs of their students, their specific courses and accessibility to the resources within their institutions.

As clearly mentioned earlier in this paper, teachers can opt for either implicit or explicit integration of strategies, and their training, into their course content, and can incorporate it into a combination of classroom activities, discussions, handouts, applied presentations, assignments or homework, any likely research tasks, and off-class lectures, seminars and practicum, if ever

possible. Teachers may take advantage of an instructional guide aimed specifically at enhancing students' understanding and utilization of learning strategies, such as videotaped mini-teachings (Rubin, 1996) demonstrating how to transfer successful strategies to new tasks in order to scrutinize and advance their own learning. Alternatively, teachers may enforce, especially with more proficient learners, to arrange micro-teachings of their own, at the end of which an exchange of ideas and debate will follow. The conversations may be extended to group work, where students in some circumstances may feel more comfortable sharing their views, and offering critique and suggestions in a somewhat informal way without the teacher's immediate presence. Similarly, peer work arrangements of more and less proficient learners in and outside of the classroom might be helpful, as casual interaction between such students may candidly address issues regarding strategy use, and can benefit all in that lower level students can, without restraint, discuss and address their problems and can learn the tactics of comparatively better peers, and more advanced students can be heartened by the leadership role they undertake and reinforce their knowledge and practice as they gain insights into the difficulties less proficient learners encounter.

Teachers may also avail the classroom of written sources, such as renowned articles on the issue that are of practical value to the students, as such materials may provide invaluable ideas and insights from veteran educators and researchers that teachers can replicate in their own context. Another great resource language teachers can bring into play in the classroom is a carefully selected textbook that takes account of and underpins strategy use through its activities and elucidations, which will routinely motivate and guide students to improve their range of effective strategies. However, teachers should contextualize the strategies covered in the textbooks by clarifying and fulfilling their relevance, purpose and function in their particular contexts. This will also help attain one of the major objectives set in the abstract, the crucial need for the integration of successful strategy instruction into language classes and curricula.

In sum, in view of the findings that are at odds with each other, obtained from various studies delved into and combined in this research, it might not be accurate, after all, to maintain that "gender difference trends in strategy use are quite pronounced within and across cultures" (Green and Oxford, 1995, p.291). Thus, additional language strategy and gender research of different contexts, shedding light on students from varied cultures, proficiency levels, age groups, and so forth are needed to narrow down and investigate the issue of factors affecting strategy choice further. Simply assuming that females and males use a list of fixed strategies based on a limited range of convergent research in this area, notwithstanding countless influential factors not scrutinized, is not only

ignoring the complex, sophisticated, and sometimes ambiguous, nature of learners as individuals, but also overlooking the multidimensionality and convolution of the language learning strategy construct.

Moreover, the inconsistent findings in gender and language learning strategies research investigated in this study lead to the conviction that effective strategy instruction is the response and key to the disjointed differences between males' and females' strategy use, and should be an integral part of classroom instruction favoring equal chances of success for students of both genders. After all, only through strategy training, can students experiment with a variety of language learning strategies, become more aware of their preferred strategies and what works best for them, transfer successful strategies to new contexts as they realize there is more than one right way of doing things, augment their self-confidence, grow to be more responsible, autonomous and engaged learners, start monitoring their own performance and progress, diagnose their weaknesses and inaccuracies and work on correcting them, all of which will ultimately help them to vastly enhance their learning and proficiency in the language.

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