

AFFECTIVE FACTORS AND L2 LEARNING: THE ROLE OF GENDER

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1.- General Overview and Main Approaches

Lightbown and Spada (1999:49-70) refer to different factors affecting the learning of a second language, such as intelligence, aptitude, personality, motivation, learner preferences and beliefs, and age. However, much work has been done on the influence of gender on second language learning. The actual interest in language and gender as an independent field of study goes back to the 1970s, coinciding with the feminist movement and its “concerns about the connections between sex, power, and language” (Pavlenko, Blackledge, Piller and Teutsch-Dwyer, 17). Years after the emergence of research in this field, some studies appeared about the relationship between second language acquisition research and the study of language and gender. Most recently, researchers like Susan Ehrlich, Kathryn Woolard and Aneta Pavlenko have dealt with aspects of multilingualism and bilingualism in relation to the field of language and gender. Sunderland argues that this work is characterized by the conception of “gender as something not always apparent, but always present” (2000a:203). Here, the social construction of gender also plays a very important role in the learning process. As it will be seen in next sections, the social practices associated with each gender in a particular speech community are a strong determinant of the way men and women learn a second language, especially in natural settings¹. Also, the context where the second language is learnt can also affect the learning process in the sense that it can create different results for each gender.

Regarding approaches on second language acquisition, Pavlenko and Piller (2001:3) claim that SLA² research has been characterized by “gender blindness”, due to psycholinguistic approaches and the emergence of Universal Grammar. Both perspectives failed to recognize individual differences in students and treated them as undifferentiated learners. Both considered individual differences as “noise”, that is, a factor that is present but which cannot determine the process of language acquisition. They cite McKay and Wong (1996), who state that for many years, approaches to SLA have ignored not only individual processes but also the learning process as well as the social context in which the L2 is being acquired. In the last years, sociolinguistic and sociocultural approaches have been proposed to explain L2 acquisition but they see gender as a variable fixed in every culture designating males and females from an essentialist perspective.

¹ Lightbown and Spada define natural acquisition contexts as “those in which the learner is exposed to the language at work or in a social interaction or, if the learner is a child, in a school situation where most of the other children are native speakers of the target language” (1999:91).

² Second Language Acquisition.

As opposed to all this, Pavlenko and Piller propose “a more context-sensitive approach which treats gender as a system of social relations and discursive practices whose meaning varies across speech communities” (ibid). This is the basic notion for studying SLA and gender and this is also what Susan Ehrlich proposes. She cites Ellis (1994), who claims that research in SLA and gender should take into account the idea of gender as a social construct that changes from one community to another (1997:428). This would explain how gender affects the acquisition of a language: it is not gender by itself but all the relationships, socialization practices and roles associated to gender that influence and, in some way, even determine language learning.

2.- Gender-related Factors in Second Language Acquisition

First of all, in order to understand the role that gender plays in the acquisition of a second language (from here on, L2), it is important to take into account the different social practices that determine the construction of gender in a particular speech community. In this sense, there are two essential factors affecting L2 learning: access to the target language³ (TL) and social and cultural practices. Both factors are gender-related to some extent and as such, vary from one community to another. Exposure to the TL is an important determinant of success in the acquisition of a language. Ehrlich 1997 points to the fact that in some communities, women have a more restricted access to the TL than men. This access is determined by work choice or opportunities and also by socioeconomic status. In some communities, women are expected to stay at home, and it is usually men who go to work. In a situation like this, men will be more exposed to interactions in the TL and therefore, will be more proficient than women. At the same time, in some other communities, women do go to work but they are restricted to workplaces where the TL is not widely spoken (e.g. factories where many immigrants from the same country work together). In this case, again, women would be less proficient than men. Hence, it is clear that it is not gender by itself what determines who is successful in language learning. Rather, it is a matter of what practices are associated to and what behaviors are expected from each gender.

As for cultural practices, women’s cultural role varies from one community to another. In some societies, women are considered guardians of the native language. This means that they are expected to maintain the native language and culture and transmit it to their children. In such cases, they will not use the TL as much as men do, and will not reach the same level of proficiency. In contrast, Medicine (as cited by Ehrlich 1997:432) identifies another cultural role for women: that of “cultural broker”. She uses it to explain the role of Native American women in their communities. They usually worked for missionaries and had to learn their language. At the same time, they were expected to teach children both languages – the L1 and the L2. Related to this is the idea of women as cultural mediators: in some societies, men expect women to mediate between the two cultures and as a result, they will become proficient in both languages. All this suggests that women’s success in language learning depends on how they are perceived by the rest of society and what their role is supposed to be.

³ Target language is the term used in language acquisition research to refer to “the language which is being learned, whether it is the first language or a second (or third or fourth) language” (Lightbown and Spada 1999:179).

In addition to all this, Ehrlich also draws attention to the importance of the specific social context in which the TL is being learnt. This L2 setting “can also create gender-differentiated outcomes in second language acquisition” (1997:433). Most of the gendered practices created by the L2 setting will eventually determine the degree of success that a male and a female learner will be able to achieve. In order to assess the influence of these gendered practices on the learning process, it would be helpful to take a look at how affective factors determine the acquisition of an L2.

3.- Affective Factors in L2 Acquisition

The terms “affect” or “affective factors” have traditionally been used to refer to “aspects of emotion, feeling, mood or attitude which condition behavior” (Arnold and Brown 1999:1). For Dickinson, affect is concerned with the learner’s attitude toward the TL and the TL community, and with her/his emotional responses (1987:25⁴, as cited by Finch 2000). What is most important, nonetheless, is the fact that affective factors contribute as much as cognitive factors to the learning process and that consequently, teachers should be aware of them. In fact, Arnold and Brown advocate an integrative approach to language learning where both the cognitive and the affective side are taken into account when analyzing the language learning process (1999:7).

Much research has been done on the field of affect, though not all researchers agree when trying to offer a comprehensive list of affective factors. This section will deal with four different individual factors⁵ with a special emphasis on the relation between affective factors and gender, which constitute the central pillar of this paper.

Motivation

Gardner (1985:10) defines motivation to learn a second language as “the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity”.

Lightbown and Spada state that “motivation in second language learning is a complex phenomenon which can be defined in terms of two factors: learners’ communicative needs and their attitudes toward the second language community” (1999:56). The implication is that if learners have to use the TL to communicate, they will perceive their communicative value and will understand that it is necessary for them to become proficient speakers. As a result, they will be more motivated to learn. At the same time, if they have positive attitudes toward the TL and/or the TL community, their motivation will also be higher. Sunderland (2000a:206) cites different studies that have proved female students to be more motivated than male students. Generally speaking, it seems to be the case that girls’ instrumental motivation is higher than boys’. Also, a study by Batters (1986) found different attitudes to classroom activities in boys and girls: “the boys were more negative than the girls in all areas, except speaking, where they were equally positive” (Sunderland, 2000a:206).

⁴ Dickinson, L. (1987) *Self-Instruction in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ It is interesting the distinction made by Arnold and Brown (1999:8) between individual and relational factors. Individual factors are those concerned with the learner as an individual and relational factors are those which relate to the learner as a participant in a socio-cultural process.

Sunderland claims that “[b]oys’ (lack of) motivation for language learning could be seen (...) in terms of both foreign language use (perhaps associated with careers for women), and gender itself (the felt need to ‘perform masculinity’ by *oppositionally* avoiding those practices perceived to be associated with femininity)” (ibid). According to this, the fact that more girls tend to take language courses may make languages be considered “girls’ subjects”. However, Sunderland suggests that there is a difference as far as type of school is concerned: the number of boys choosing language classes in single-sex schools is higher than the number of boys choosing those classes in mixed-sex schools (2000a:204). According to her, “[t]his suggests that social reasons play a role in subject choice” (ibid), i.e., peer influence and the fear to risk their gender identity influences male students’ choice of subjects. This suggests that, as far as gender identity is concerned, masculinity seems to be more fixed than femininity and boys are usually more concerned than girls about not transgressing it. As Ekstrand (cited by Sunderland, 2000a:205) points out, “all the behavioral variation [between women and men] may be explained by cultural factors” and therefore, all differences between men and women can be said to be “socially constructed” (ibid). What is more, the fact that the number of male teachers is smaller than that of female teachers also seems to affect boys’ choice of language classes in the sense that in boys’ mind, it comes to reinforce the clear distinction between what is masculine and what is feminine. For them, the fact that there are more female teachers symbolizes the idea that language classes are to be avoided because they are for girls.

a) *Learning Styles and Strategies*

Much research has been done on the field of language learning strategies and gender. Rebecca L. Oxford (1990:1) defines language learning strategies as “steps taken by students to enhance their own learning”. She claims that strategies are important because “they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence” (ibid). Gardner and MacIntyre (1993, as cited by Oxford and Green 1995:263) suggested that “characteristics of the language learner, situational variables, and types of learning strategies interact in a complicated way to influence proficiency in a second language”. As far as gender is concerned, Oxford and Green (1995:266) point out that females are usually reported to use more strategies than males in all SILL-based studies around the world. Generally, women are said to use more cognitive, memory, compensation, affective and social strategies (Ehrman and Oxford 1989, Oxford and Nyikos 1989, Oxford and Green 1995, Kaylani 1996). Oxford (1994:146) states that “it may be the qualitative differences in their strategy use that favor women and girls, who often show better classroom performance in a second or foreign language than males”.

Some studies have tried to find out an explanation for this supposed correlation between students’ choice of strategies and their achievement. The basic idea is that good language learners are aware of the type of strategies they use and the reason why they use them (Oxford and Green 1995:262). This is so because “appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence” (Oxford 1990:1). In their study of learning strategies, proficiency and gender, Oxford and Green show that the strategies used by women are different from those used by men but they conclude that there is “no overlap between the strategies used more often by women and the strategies used more

often by more proficient students” (1995:290). However, Chamot identifies good language learners as active learners who practice communication in the TL and ask questions for clarification (2001:29). Among the results found by Oxford and Green is the fact that women use more social and affective strategies. They describe social strategies as involving “asking questions, cooperating with native speakers, and becoming culturally aware” (1995:264). Following Chamot, women and good language learners share a preference for social strategies. Therefore, there could be a correlation between choice of learning strategies and achievement since generally speaking, women are said to be better language learners than men (Sunderland 2000a, Sunderland 2000b, Ehrlich 1997).

Anxiety

Scovel defines anxiety as “a state of apprehension, a vague fear” (Scovel 1978:134⁶, as cited by Scarcella and Oxford 1992:54). Anxiety is usually state or situational anxiety, that is, it “arises in response to a particular situation or event” but it can also be a personal trait – trait anxiety (Scarcella and Oxford 1992:54). Heron talks about “existential anxiety”, which arises in group situations and can be divided into: “acceptance anxiety” or anxiety about being accepted in the group, “orientation anxiety” or anxiety about being able to understand what is going on and “performance anxiety” or anxiety about being able to perform what one is expected to (Heron 1989:33⁷, as cited by Arnold and Brown 1999:8). According to Scarcella and Oxford, “anxiety stems from the traditional social structure of the classroom” (1992:55). This means that traditional teacher-centered classes are based on the idea that the teacher is the knower who has to transfer her/his knowledge to the learners. This places students in a position of inferiority which eventually leads to anxiety⁸.

b) Identity and Culture Shock

Culture shock is “a form of anxiety that results from the loss of commonly perceived and understood signs and symbols of social intercourse” (Adler 1987:25, as cited by Scarcella and Oxford 1992:55). It is usually associated with a fear of “losing oneself” in the TL culture (ibid) and related to feelings of loneliness, anger, sadness, frustration, self-pity and even physical illness (Brown 1994:170⁹, as cited by Arnold and Brown 1999:22).

Ehrlich refers to the fact that the L2 setting can create “gendered-differentiated linguistic practices” that can also influence the learning of the TL (1997:120). One of the sexist practices she discusses is that of sexual harassment. In certain settings, female learners may feel sexually harassed by male native speakers and this situation can affect their identity and culture shock. When female learners encounter problems when interacting with male speakers, their gender identity can be harmed. Since gender is socially constructed, the type of practices associated with it varies from one culture to another. In this sense, in the new L2

⁶ Scovel, T. (1978) “The Effect of Affect on Foreign Language Learning: a Review of the Anxiety Research”. In *Language Learning*, 28. 129-142.

⁷ Heron, J. (1989) *The Facilitator's Handbook*. London: Kogan Page.

⁸ The relation between anxiety and gender will be dealt with when discussing Identity and Culture Shock.

⁹ Brown, H. D. (1994) *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, (3rd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.

setting, some women may feel their gender identity is at risk as a consequence of the different way in which it is perceived by the new culture. Thus, their interactions and behaviors can be interpreted by men in a way completely different from what men in their native culture would understand. Also, male native speakers may have different expectations from them. All this can affect women's acquisition of the TL and can be part of their culture shock.

Similarly, this gendered practice and this feeling of being sexually harassed can lead to a choice of different learning strategies by men and women. Ehrlich (2001:118) identifies a "'positive' linguistic consequence of sexual harassment". She explains how female learners who feel sexually harassed when they interact with male native speakers may choose not to interact in the TL anymore. On the contrary, they will prefer to read books written in the TL in order to improve their proficiency. Therefore, while male learners may continue interacting in the TL and thus, improving their oral skills, female learners would rather avoid conversations in the TL and choose to improve their reading skills. However, the fact that some women have to cope with sexually-harassing conversations and situations will help them develop the type of communicative strategies they need. In this sense, this type of gendered practice would also help them develop some kind of oral proficiency, although once they have been exposed to some of these situations, they are more likely to begin avoiding conversations and make use of other learning strategies. This experience of sexually-harassing practices would also lead to culture shock, which is characterized by symptoms such as "emotional regression, physical illness, panic, anger, hopelessness, self-pity, lack of confidence, indecision, sadness, alienation, a sense of deception, a perception of 'reduced personality', and glorification of one's own native culture" (Oxford, 1999:65). Most of these symptoms could be easily associated with victims of sexual harassment, and could be identified as strong determinants of failure in L2 learning.

Furthermore, gendered practices can also lead to anxiety. Arnold and Brown associate anxiety with "negative feelings such as uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension and tension" (1999:8). Oxford states that "anxiety sometimes arises in response to a particular situation or event" (1999:60). This means that as a result of sexual harassment, female learners can suffer from some of the feelings stated above and this can also affect their language learning. In fact, sexual harassment could be said to lead to harmful anxiety, which is related to "negative attitudes and beliefs" (ibid). This is exactly what female learners who have been exposed to sexually-harassing situations would feel toward male native speakers.

4.- Gender in the Language Classroom

There have been many studies about classroom interaction, which tried to find differences between girls' and boys' participation in classes. In her study of non-native speakers' classroom interactions, Alcón claims that "language-learning opportunities in the second language classroom may not be the same for male and female learners" (1994:52). She carried out a study of 12 male and 12 female Spanish EFL students at secondary school. She found that in mixed-sex classrooms, boys clearly dominate output, with a "greater proportion of responses to personal solicits performed by [them]" (1994:56). This suggests that it may be extremely difficult for teachers to provide girls with the chance to communicate in the TL in the classroom. Girls are reported to initiate more negotiation of meaning while "boys tend to talk more, introduce topics, or interrupt other participants"

(1994:60).

In single-sex classes and/or discussions, a different pattern is found. Alcón compared girls' turn takings when talking to boys with their turn takings when interacting with other girls and she found that in single-sex discussions "girls' number of interactions and self-initiated turns increase [while] the amount of negotiation decreases" (1994:63). This means that when talking to other females, girls interrupt more and become more active, while in conversation with men, they adopt a subordinate role. Lozano (1995:231) explains this in the following way:

(...) las niñas no son taciturnas por naturaleza en situaciones de discurso público, sino que a lo largo de su vida escolar el comportamiento de los profesores y los estudiantes varones va forjando en ellas la sensación de que en los ámbitos públicos es más adecuado para su género pasar desapercibida, ser invisible, pues no intervenir en el aula es lo más parecido a no estar siquiera.

As Losey suggests when citing Freire and Giroux, a pedagogical approach based on the idea of teachers holding the power in a class "reproduces race, class, and gender-based oppression" (1995:655). As a result of this, these language classes seem to perpetuate the stereotype images of men as dominant and women as subordinate. "The dominance of men may be influenced by cultural norms ... internalized in such a way that they are generally accepted and taken for granted" (Alcón 1994:64). All this suggests that learners' participation depends on power relationships in the classroom and is determined to a great extent by gendered stereotypes. In Alcón's words, "verbal interaction in the classroom has little to do with gender and a great deal with accepting, repeating and perpetuating the female and male stereotypes" (ibid).

Moreover, studies have been done on what is traditionally referred to as "differential teacher treatment by gender" (Sunderland, 2000a:208). This refers to the fact that teachers' behavior toward students varies depending on their own gender and that of their students. As Sunderland states "the social construction of gender being what it is, it is unlikely that differential teacher treatment will ever not be a feature of mixed-sex classrooms. What is at present unclear, however, is its effect" (1994b:153). Nonetheless, what is clear is that teachers have an important role in their students' learning process. As a matter of fact, Meece describes teachers as "the hidden carriers of society's messages" (as cited by Halpern 1992:196).

Generally speaking, teachers tend to give boys more attention, they call on boys more than on girls, they give more feedback to boys' comments than girls', and place more emphasis on males' achievements. Lozano (1995:230) cites a study by Subirats and Brullet¹⁰ 1988, in which they analyzed interactions between teachers and students in schools and found that in all of them teachers addressed male students more often than they addressed females. In fact, in Lozano's words, "[este] hecho (...) se repite en la mayoría de países de nuestro entorno en todos los niveles educativos y (...) es especialmente marcado cuando el profesor es varón" (ibid). However, this is not always the case and some studies have found that boys do not always receive more attention than girls. When it does happen, nonetheless, it tends to be due to collaborative practices rather than sexist behavior on the part of the teacher (Sunderland 1994b, Sunderland 2000a). This means that the fact that

¹⁰ Subirats, Marina and Cristina Brullet (1988) *Rosa y Azul. La Transmisión de los Géneros en la Escuela Mixta*. Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura – Instituto de la Mujer.

boys speak more in class than girls forces teachers to respond to them acting collaboratively. At the same time, boys tend to create more discipline problems than girls and this also leads teachers to pay more attention to them as a means of avoiding those problems (Sunderland 1994b:149). Sunderland claims that, even though the effects of teachers' differential treatment by gender are not clear, one of its effects can be the development of feelings of low self-esteem by girls (1994b:150). As she suggests, "the effect of differential treatment on language learning opportunities and language acquisition is hard to research but, again, hypothesizing effects is a start" (ibid).

In addition to this, some teachers have different expectations from girls and boys: in certain areas, they usually expect more from boys and as a consequence, tend to encourage them to perform well at school and achieve high grades a great deal more frequently than they encourage girls. This affects girls' performance in the classroom. However, this is not usually the case in language classrooms. As a result of the belief that girls are better language learners, teachers normally expect girls to perform better in the TL. This relation between teachers' expectations and students' academic achievement can be explained in terms of what is called the "self-fulfilling prophecy", which means that "students perform in ways that teachers expect" (Nieto 2000:43). This refers to the fact that students' performance depends on what they believe teachers expect from them: if they know that teachers do not expect much from them, they would not be motivated to learn more since they would feel that their efforts would not be valued. This suggests the importance of avoiding gender-bias in the classroom since it can have a strong effect on students' motivation and by extension, on their success in language learning.

Also the hidden curriculum plays an important role in students' learning. Cunningsworth states that every textbook has a hidden curriculum and defines it as "[a] set of social and cultural values which are inherent in their make-up" (1995:90). These implicit messages are extremely important for learners' self-esteem and motivation to learn. The misrepresentation of women in education is quite obvious in many textbooks: e.g. men's achievements are usually given more importance than women's. Similarly, Swann (1992:96) identifies other characteristics of this misrepresentation of women in textbooks: both in pictures and texts, there are more males than females, and men usually have a more active role whereas females are usually associated with stereotyped roles. All this contributes to promote this type of gendered stereotypes, which will eventually determine the way women are perceived in society and will also create gendered practices and expectations that will influence women's language learning.

5.- Conclusion

This paper has tried to demonstrate how gender, understood as a system of social practices that vary from one culture to another, can influence the acquisition of a second/foreign language and what role it plays in the relationship between affective factors and language learning. The problem with older approaches to the study of gender and language learning is that they failed to recognize gender as a social construct rather than simply a fixed biological category. It is clear, then, that studies of gender and language learning can only be comprehensive if they take into account the social and cultural dimension of gender.

Many different gender-related factors clearly affect the way men and women acquire an L2. Access to the TL is an important determinant of success in language learning. This access seems to be gender-determined in the sense that in some specific contexts, it might be easier for men to have access to the TL, whereas in some other contexts, women can become more proficient than men due to more frequent access to the TL. Also, social and cultural practices tend to be gendered and vary from one community to another. Some of these practices may benefit women's L2 learning, whereas some others clearly have a negative effect on their acquisition of the TL.

As for affective factors, they are determined by cultural and social practices both in the TL and native language communities. As Oxford points out, "language learning is fully situated within a given cultural context" (1996:x) and as such, it cannot be separated from cultural practices in both communities. Thus, the social role of language learning is an important factor influencing students' motivation to learn the TL. The fact that in most cultures language learning is associated with femininity leads male students in certain contexts to avoid taking language courses. Also, the type of opportunities that the L2 setting creates for both female and male learners determines the degree of motivation they will show. Finally, motivation also includes attitudes toward the TL/TL community, and many studies report females to show more positive attitudes than males.

The choice of language learning strategies is clearly affected by the social and cultural gendered practices in the two communities. Cross-cultural differences with regard to gender play an important role in the way women and men would approach the process of acquiring an L2. These gendered practices occur both inside and outside the classroom and they are important because they bring about the notion of gender identity in language learning. The process of acquiring an L2 involves in most cases the adoption of a new gender identity in accordance with the usual practices in the TL community. This can have very harmful effects on language learners' motivation and may be the cause of anxiety, cultural shock, and emotional problems. However, some more research is necessary in order to find out and evaluate the influence of gender on language learning and its effects on learners.

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