

The Influence of Gender Differences on Chinese English Learners' Oral Ability

Enjun Liang^{1, †, a}, Si Ye^{2, †, *}

¹ School of Media, Xinyang Normal University, Henan, China;

² School of Labor Economics, Capital University of Economics and Business, Beijing, China

* Corresponding Author Email: 32019050054@cueb.edu.cn, ^a 631306060115@mails.cqjtu.edu.cn

[†] These authors contributed equally

Abstract. Oral English ability has been one of the essential domains in foreign language learning. The study of gender difference is a very common research topic, and many research fields have paid attention to it, including experts from social sciences, linguistics, and culture. According to previous findings, most researchers in various fields agreed that there are gender differences in the ability to oral English. Some scholars pointed out that gender differences in language learning are reflected in the spelling and pronunciation of words. Women tend to use diverse strategies in language learning, so they learn more efficiently. Others concluded that the gender difference in language is determined by the inevitable reflection of the values of a specific society and the way of national thinking in language. In terms of the relationship between gender and oral English ability, most researchers found that the oral expression ability of women is better than that of men based on different factors. Thus, this paper focuses on the potential impact of gender differences on Chinese learners' oral English ability. Firstly, this paper introduces five aspects of gender differences in Chinese learners' spoken English, including pronunciation, grammatical structure, vocabulary usage, the difference in communicative contexts, and learning ability. Then, by analyzing the causes of these gender differences in biology, learning strategies, social status, and psychology, the conclusion is clear that women have certain advantages over men in learning spoken English, even though it is temporary and will change with other factors. The contribution of this paper is that it inspires future researchers to explore more about the potential gender differences in language learning and the effective strategies to cope with this phenomenon.

Keywords: Gender difference; Oral English ability; Chinese English learner.

1. Introduction

As the center of human life activities, language plays an important role to everyone. Nevertheless, according to the distinctions of language learners' attributes, learning effects might vary a lot. Judging from individual differences, there are a lot of factors that affect language learning ability (e.g., age, region and intelligence), among which gender difference is one of the most controversial and important factors. Since the 1960s, sociolinguistics has developed vigorously, and the problem of gender and language has become one of the popular topics studied by linguists. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the influence of gender differences on the oral ability of Chinese English learners and analyze the underlying reasons, and finally come up with several feasible suggestions. By understanding the gender differences of language learners, this paper hopes to improve the efficiency of foreign language teaching to a large extent and cope with the potential inequality in language learning between genders according to the scientific basis.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gender and language

Gender difference refers to the differences in personality and role behaviors between the sexes based on physiological and psychological factors. Language, an important tool used for communication, plays a central role in humans' life and work. However, due to the differences of

language learners, their learning effects might vary to a large extent. Among all the possible factors that have an impact on language learning, gender is considered to be one of the most conspicuous ones. Since the 17th century, sociologists have emphasized gender differences in language learning. Ellis et al. found that females were better than males in language development, spelling, and inductive reasoning, while males were better than females in verbal analogy and vocabulary. Hartshorne and Ullman concluded that by acquiring the mother tongue, women could produce more spontaneous language. In learning the mother tongue, women will use some generalization strategies earlier to improve the efficiency of language learning. Also, Dennis Baron pointed out that the gender difference in language is determined by the inevitable reflection of the values of a specific society and the way of national thinking in language.

Additionally, although women are slightly inferior to men in creativity and imagination, women usually have stronger endurance than men. This positive learning attitude makes women persist in learning and get good grades under relatively monotonous and humdrum conditions. It is also found that men and women used different learning strategies in language learning, and girls frequently used various language learning strategies, which is an important guarantee to improve the efficiency of language learning and develop the ability for self-directed learning. Based on the studies discussed above, it is reasonable to believe that there indeed exist gender differences in language learning.

2.2 Gender and Oral English Learning

With the pace of globalization galloping, the opportunities for communicating with foreigners and speaking foreign languages have mounted, which offers more access to broadening horizons and facilitating economic development. The cultivation of oral English expression ability is a complex issue involving many aspects. From the perspective of oral learners, it is not only related to the learners' conditions, such as learning machines, learning strategies, learning conditions, etc., but also to the learners' biological factors such as age, sex, intelligence, and personality. Also, based on the study of gender differences in the oral ability of the first language, Halpern concluded that the second language use and oral communication ability of women are better than that of men. Based on the statistical analysis of the oral test scores of 12110 English learners, it is found that the oral expression ability of women is better than that of men on the whole. Still, the difference in oral expression ability between men and women gradually decreases with age. Overall, most scholars have concluded that women usually perform better than men in the field of oral English expression.

3. Performance of Gender Differences

3.1 Differences in Pronunciation and Intonation in Spoken Language.

3.1.1 Difference in Pronunciation

Due to the calm and introverted character of women, the pronunciation of women is gentler and more cautious, and the pronunciation is more standard. For men, their social status endows them with rough and cheerful dispositions, so men's pronunciation is more casual, mostly based on their own will, and men tend to have non-standard pronunciation. For example, the pronunciation of "r" after a vowel, in countries where English is the first language, the "r" sound is a symbol of upper social status. Trudgill found through research that in Detroit black English, the upper-middle-class women who pronounce the vowel "r" sound as high as 90.0%, while only 66.7% of men in this class, the ratio is much lower than that of women. According to the data, women's pronunciation is more formal, and their standard and cautious pronunciation is to gain a foothold in society. Men's pronunciation is more active and casual because their social status does not bring constraints to men but brings privileges.

3.1.2 Difference in the Tone of Voice

When answering questions, women often use the rising tone of questioning or asking to express uncertainty about the question. At the same time, for the accuracy of the answer, women often use

antonymous interrogative sentences, and they use antonymous interrogative sentences with rising tones to express their views and opinions. Women also often use an uncertain tone to express their euphemism and politeness.

In addition, to express the ups and downs of feelings, women will use variable intonation, speed, and volume, and these changes show women's lack of confidence in their social status. Men often use flat or flat intonations to show their boldness and authority. When answering questions, men expressed their views using a positive tone of voice. Compared with women's highly variable intonation, men's intonation is fewer ups and downs when speaking. At the end of a sentence, they will use a high-falling sentence pattern to express a firm, bold and strong attitude towards things.

3.1.3 Difference in Sound Quality

Sound quality refers to the quality and characteristics of sound. Men's voices are thicker and rougher, while women's voices are louder and louder. In addition to the influence of vocal organs on male and female voice quality, it is also affected by psychological and social factors. In English-speaking countries, males often use nasalized vowels because they express roughness, and the use of nasalized vowels reflects male character traits. Society requires women to speak gracefully, properly, and politely, so women usually use non-nasalized vowels.

Chambers believed that women's neurophysiological linguistic advantages enable women to have stronger sociolinguistic abilities than men of the same condition, and to master a great vocabulary and more language styles, even if the social roles of men and women are the same. Although there are differences in sound quality between males and females, as differences continue to narrow, females will be equal to or better than males.

3.2 Differences in Grammatical Structure in Spoken Language

Learning any language is inseparable from grammar, and spoken language is no exception. Men and women showed differences in learning grammar knowledge. Cognitive linguistics believes that language is a cognitive activity. Therefore, English learning is closely related to the cognitive way of learning. Cognitive style theory divides learners into verbal, contemplative, intuitive, and comprehensive types. According to Xu, in the process of foreign language learning, contemplative learners are better at learning foreign languages. Among them, women accounted for 72% of the contemplative types, and men accounted for 45%.

In oral language learning, the grammatical structures chosen by men and women in the same environment differ. Women often use antonymous interrogative sentences to express respect and admiration for others and, simultaneously, make communication between the two parties more fluid. In addition, women pay more attention to the accuracy and integrity of grammatical structures when they organize language in favor of grammatical knowledge, which is also to express respect for others. Men often use declarative and imperative sentences to express their views or opinions in spoken language. Due to the influence of social, psychological, and other factors, men have a rough way of speaking, which causes their oral expressions to be more casual, not paying attention to the accuracy of language expressions, and often using sentences that do not conform to grammatical expression habits.

3.3 Differences in Vocabulary Usage

Since the 19th century, women's emancipation has provided opportunities for women's equality. Although the emancipation of women broke the shackles of the rank of superiority and inferiority, allowing men and women to have the same social status. The low self-esteem that women generally have has been deeply rooted, resulting in women's long-term lack of self-confidence. The kind and gentle image of women in the social environment has become an obstacle to their progress in all aspects. Under the influence of this social environment, there are significant differences in the use of words between men and women.

Spoken vocabulary needs enough input to have the desired output [10]. First, in inputting vocabulary, there are differences between men and women in memorizing vocabulary. Women use image methods to memorize words and deepen memory by using pictures, jingles, etc. Because of women's sensitivity to things, they can form a clear perception of things, which creates an easy way for the brain to memorize vocabulary. Men tend to have comprehensible memory. Based on understanding the content of the relevant vocabulary, they use the vocabulary to make sentences and other methods to memorize [11]. Secondly, in terms of spoken words, women often use words with strong emotional colors. They often use adjectives and interjections to express the ups and downs and changes of emotions (e.g., "splendid"). Men, on the other hand, mostly use words that express affirmation or authority to express their thoughts and rarely use words that express emotions. For example, "absolutely".

3.4 Differences in Performance in Communicative Contexts

In different social environments, there are obvious differences in how men and women express themselves in oral communication. Psychologists believe that differences in the psychological aspects of men and women lead to differences in spoken language. Women are euphemistic and subtle, while men are rough and resolute. The difference makes men and women differ in the choice of topics. Women are given the status of mothers, daughters, and wives by society, so they will use family and emotions as topics of communication, and they will also use emotional sentences to express their thoughts. In oral communication, men like to control topics. They choose politics, experience, and sports as the main content of chat because they are implicitly endowed with the responsibility of defending the country from birth.

3.5 Differences in Learning Ability

In 2009, some researchers analyzed data from a Chinese school questionnaire survey on the English-speaking test for male and female students. From these data, the researchers made conclusions about gender differences between males and females. In the questionnaire on oral language learning status and self-speaking ability evaluation, the research data mainly includes four parts, the most wanted to learn skills, learning motivation, current oral language level, and self-satisfaction [12].

Among them, there is no significant difference between men and women in learning motivation, which is about 85%. In terms of the skills they want to improve, 81% of female students and 67% of male students want to improve their speaking ability, which is much higher than the learning of other abilities. When analyzing the current speaking level, 90% of female students can now conduct simple conversations and answer class questions fluently, compared to 72% of male students. Regarding self-satisfaction, 97% of female students are dissatisfied with their spoken level, compared with 89% of male students. Although the ratio of the two is not much different, the level of self-satisfaction will drive the motivation and attitude to learn oral English, so in general, female students are better than male students in all aspects, so their oral English learning ability is also higher than that of male students [12].

4. Comparative Analysis for the Differences

4.1 Physiology

Some researchers pointed out that gender differences in language learning result from the difference in physiological structure. Evidence for this comes from people with aphasia. A large body of evidence from cognitive neuroscience supports a bilateral advantage in language processing in women, where both hemispheres are active simultaneously. In contrast, men usually only use the relevant areas of the left brain to process language information, which has a left-sided processing advantage [13]. Other researchers found that there appears to be more gyrification and division in women's frontal and parietal lobes, which leads to more obvious differences in oral language learning.

Regarding the difference in speaking tones, researchers explained that the male voice box is generally large and prominent. The vocal cords are long and vibrate slowly (about 80 -- 200 Hz), so the male voice is relatively deep. Women, on the contrary, have a small larynx, short vocal cords, and fast vibrations (about 120-400 Hz), so they speak with a higher-pitched voice and intonation.

4.2 Psychology

Burstall found a huge difference in language learning motivation between men and women. This is because in real life, although the national law stipulates that men and women share equal opportunity in the aspects such as education, employment, and wage. But because of playing the social role of giving birth to children and parenting, women are in a disadvantaged position under the condition where men and women are both qualified in other aspects. Even if male students are inferior to female students in all aspects, they may be preferred because they are less constrained by social roles and have greater mobility. Therefore, female college students would pay more effort into English learning to achieve better results to increase their chips of choosing a career. And this strong learning motivation directly affects the selection and use of learning strategies. In terms of cognition, men's interests are broader but less persistent. Women's interests tend to be limited in their own lives, but once they develop a strong interest, they can last for a long time [14]. Therefore, women's motivation for oral communication improves their oral learning ability.

4.3 Learning Strategy

As an important influencing factor of learners' learning effect, language learning strategy plays a mediating role in second language learning, which links individual differences, environmental factors, and learning outcomes. In other words, individual differences and environmental factors determine learners' choice of learning strategies, and the use of learning strategies affects learning outcomes, namely, the speed of language acquisition and the highest level of language acquisition. Ullman et al. found that during language processing, women like to express themselves through language, while men pay more attention to the visual and spatial information of language. Additionally, women are more inclined to learn language based on the declarative memory system. Men tend to be based on the procedural memory system. The ways of men's and women's memory processing will have an impact on the choice of language learning strategies.

4.4 Social Status

Individuals' social identities are established and maintained mainly through language. Women are often subordinate and need to demonstrate and secure their social status in language and other ways. As a result, women try to gain the same social prestige as men by using language forms such as standard speech and highbrow sounds. Sociolinguist Rapoff's research on "Social Stratification of English in New York City" shows that women of different classes and ages use more standard language forms than men of corresponding classes and ages, and women are in a more advanced position among them. The lower middle class, to imitate the standard language and elegance of the upper middle class, tend to master their language "Overcorrecting," and women are in the lead [15].

5. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper reviews the topic of gender differences in spoken English, and concludes the main findings that: 1) According to the analysis of the differences in spoken English between men and women, we can conclude that women have certain advantages over men in learning spoken English; 2) Women's oral English scores are higher than men's, and their scores are more stable; 3) In oral language learning, women are more willing to practice and speak than men, and it is easier to express oral language; 4) The difference between men and women in oral language learning is only temporary and relative, it will change continuously with social development, personal physical

changes, and other factors, and the existence of this difference will prompt men and women to study harder.

When reviewing this topic, in the analysis of differences in oral language learning between males and females, there are only five types of comparative information, which cannot comprehensively show the differences. While in the survey data, the data information is only concentrated in one school, and it is difficult to ensure the integrity of the conclusion. Therefore, this paper proposes three strategies: First of all, men and women should change their stereotypes about their gender differences, let them recognize their strengths, have the courage to express and show themselves, and maintain an optimistic attitude towards difficulties; Secondly, for educators, according to the physical and psychological characteristics of men and women, they should teach students according to their aptitude, create an efficient and harmonious environment for them, and give full play to their different learning potentials to complement each other's advantages; Finally, because men are not good at speaking, educators need to encourage men to communicate with each other frequently. Men should improve their confidence and form their own language patterns and thinking expressions in practice. For women, they should strengthen their logical thinking ability, make their brains more flexible, and reflect more sensitively.

References

- [1] Xia Zou. The Influence of Gender Differences on College Oral English Learning and Teaching Strategies [J]. *Sci-tech Perspective*, 2012(25):169-170+274. DOI:10.19694/j.cnki.issn2095-2457.2012.25.079.
- [2] Lin Chen. Gender Differences in Language Learning: Manifestations, Causes and Reflections [J]. *Journal of PLA Foreign Language Institute*, 2014, 37(03):36-43.
- [3] Xianguang Liu. Gender Differences in Oral Communication Ability of College English Majors [J]. *Journal of Inner Mongolia Agricultural University (Social Science Edition)*, 2008(05):169-170+175. DOI:10.16853/j.issn.1009-4458.2008.05.062.
- [4] Oxford, R. & D. Crookall. Research on language learning strategies: Methods, findings, and instructional issues [J]. *The Modern Language Journal*, 1989, 73 (4) : 404 – 419.
- [5] Yinghui Xu. Gender Differences in English Learning from a Linguistic Perspective[A]. *Journal of Qiqihar Junior Teachers' College*, 2016, 1009-3958(2016)02-0078-02.
- [6] Fenfang Yao. Gender Differences in English Pronunciation and Intonation and Its Causes[A]. *Journal of Hunan City University*. 2005, 1672-1942(2005)02-0105-03.
- [7] Trudgill, Peter. *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*[M]. London: Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1974. 48-67.
- [8] Chambers, J.K. *Sociolinguistic Theory*[M]. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995. 132.
- [9] huang Xu. Gender Differences in Second Language Acquisition from the Perspective of Neurolinguistics[A]. *Cultural Journal*, 2018, 1673-7725(2018)08-0179-03.
- [10] Yuyang Zhao. On the Positive Significance of the Construction of English Language Learning Ideas to Learners[A]. *Journal of Yanbian Institute of Education*, 2021, 1673-4564 (2021) 04-0042-03.
- [11] Lihua Ye. *Gender Differences in English Learning and Its Implications for Teaching*. Shanghai Institute of Technology: Teaching and Administration, 2007, 72-73.
- [12] Bingliang Gao, Guodong Jiang. The Phenomenon of Gender Difference in Oral English Test and Its Analysis[A]. *Journal of Anhui University of Technology (Social Sciences)*, 2009, 1671-9247 (2009) 03-0089-03.
- [13] Burman, D. D., T. Bitan & J.R. Booth. Sex differences in neural processing of language among children [J]. *Neuropsychologia*, 2008, 46 (5): 1349-1362.
- [14] Guodong Yu, Yaxin Wu. Language and gender: differences as well as commonalities [J]. *Foreign Language Education*, 2002, 1000-5544(2002) 02-0024-05.
- [15] Ping Zhang, Zuxin Gao, Jingzhong Liu. A Study on Gender Differences in Vocabulary Concepts and Strategies of English Learners [J]. *Foreign Languages and Foreign Language Teaching*, 2002(08):35-37+52.