A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS OF GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Texas A&M University
AERA 2012 Vancouver, Canada
Margarita Huerta
Fuhui Tong
Beverly Irby
Tiberio Garza
Presentation Outline

- Define Terms
- Introduce Topic, Theory, & Background Research
- Explain Purpose & Research Questions
- Discuss Research Methods
- Present Findings
- Present Discussion
- Provide Recommendation for Future Studies
Definitions 1

- **L1** – First language
- **L2** – Second language
- **ELL** – English Language Learner
- **ESL** – English as a Second Language
- **Language Learning** – An individual’s proficiency in language at a given time, which can be quantified as a measure from a language test.
- **Intervention** – strategies used to enhance language learning (e.g. scaffolding language; using techniques to aid comprehension; integrating listening, reading, speaking, and writing into lessons; teaching language in the content areas).
Definitions

- **Gender** — the difference between masculine and feminine identities, believed to be a fluid category depending on the individuals’ social, cultural, and situational contexts (Ehlrich, 1997; Pavlenko, 2001; Kubota, 2003).

- **Bilingual Setting** — context in which students are learning an L2 simultaneous to their L1 (usually a context in which the student is a minority).

- **ESL Setting** — context in which students are learning an L2 (usually a context in which the student is a minority).

- **Foreign Language Setting** — context in which students are learning an L2 as a foreign language (usually a context in which the student is a majority).

- **Heritage Language Setting** — context in which a person is studying a language he/she has proficiency in and/or has a cultural connection to that language.
Introduction

- There seems to exist a female advantage in first language (L1) learning (Burman, Bitman, & Booth, 2008; Roulston & Northstone, 2002).
- Much less is known regarding gender differences in second language (L2) learning.
- Yet, L2 researchers note that gender is a critical individual and social variable in language learning (Brantmeier, Schuller, & Wilde, 2007).
Past Reviews

- Past reviews conclude that:
  - Gender differences in L2 learning are likely due to cognitive and cultural differences (Ekstrand, 1980).
  - More conclusive research on gender related to L2 learning is needed (Spencer & Lewis, 1986).
  - Research findings are not conclusive regarding male or female advantage in L2 learning (Brantmier et al., 2007).
## Theory & Past Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Type with example</th>
<th>Theoretical Premise</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Language Strategy Use** (e.g. Oxford & Nykos; Andreou, Andeou, & Vlachos, 2008) | Successful L2 learners use more language learning strategies. | Earlier studies – Females use more strategies.  
 More recent studies – No difference in strategy use by gender. |
| **Affective Studies** (e.g. Gardner, 1972; Kssau, 2006; Kobayashi, 2002) | Successful L2 learners have more positive attitudes, higher motivation, and less anxiety. | Females tend to report more positive affective variables than males. |
The purpose of this research synthesis was to systematically review existing research on gender related to second language (L2) learning as assessed by language tests (i.e. L2 learning that is quantified).

We sought to answer the following questions:

1. What causes gender differences in L2 learning?
2. What educational practices appear promising for optimal L2 learning for male and female L2 learners?
Research Methods

- **Literature Search**
  1. Searched peer-reviewed journal articles.
  2. Assessed findings based on inclusion criteria.
  3. Reviewed reference lists for additional studies (Final sample size = 19).

- **Literature Organization**
  Developed matrices according to grade level (i.e. elementary, secondary, post-secondary) to record pertinent information (i.e. citation, study context, study methods and sample size/grade, interventions used, measurement, L2, and results).
## Research Findings Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Type</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Elementary** = 4 studies.  
All in bilingual settings in the U.S.A. (K-2<sup>nd</sup>) | Mixed findings.  
All studies reported some form of instructional language intervention. |
| **Secondary** = 8 studies.  
Mixed settings (junior high & high school)  
4 bilingual (2 English-Spanish; 1 Spanish-Basque; 1 English-Hebrew); 1 ESL (in England); 2 foreign language settings (in England learning French; in Lebanon learning English); 1 heritage language (Irish). | Majority of the studies (N = 6) found girls to statistically outperform boys on L2 measures.  
Only one study in bilingual setting in U.S.A. with interventions did not find gender differences in L2 measures.  
Researchers discuss importance of affective factors (motivation and attitude) in the learning process at this age. |
| **Post-Secondary** = 5 studies.  
All in foreign language settings (L2 = English, Spanish, French). | Females outperformed males on L2 measures.  
None of researchers reported using L2 instructional interventions. |
Discussion — Research Question 1

- What causes gender differences in L2 learning measure outcomes?

- Age and interventions
  - Younger vs. older students + presence or non-presence of interventions - Younger seems ideal to mitigate gender differences.

- Language learning setting and interventions
  - Bilingual vs. foreign language settings + presence or non-presence of interventions – Bilingual settings seem ideal to mitigate gender differences.

- Presence of interventions seem to be critical to mitigate gender differences, but also confound conclusions.
Discussion — Research Question 2

- What educational practices appear promising for optimal L2 learning for male and female L2 learners?
  - **Interventions** — good to implement
  - **Environment** — should be supportive and engaging
  - **Individuals** — students with a strong L1 base, seem to have higher language learning achievement regardless of age or gender
## Recommendations for Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Type</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elementary</strong></td>
<td>Replicate studies – especially longitudinal studies with interventions – to verify what variables play a part in L2 success for girls and boys.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Secondary</strong></td>
<td>Replicate studies – especially casual-effect studies – to verify the predictive power of affective variables on L2 achievement for adolescents. Conduct studies with interventions to see if there is a lessening of gender differences in L2 outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Post-Secondary</strong></td>
<td>Conduct more experimental studies with stronger methodologies (i.e. valid measurement instruments). Conduct studies with interventions to see if there is a lessening of gender differences in L2 outcomes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thank You!

A copy of this presentation is available on our website:
Language Diversity Network
http://ldn.tamu.edu/


Selected References Cont...