

The impact of gender on attainment in learning English as a foreign language

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of gender on students' achievement in learning English as a foreign language in secondary and higher vocational schools in Poland, as well as teachers' and students' opinions concerning the importance of this influence. The collected data provided ample evidence that girls achieved significantly better results than boys. Such results support the socio-linguistic finding that female students outperform males as they are more open to new linguistic forms in the target language and eradicate interlanguage forms that deviate from target language norms more readily than their male counterparts (Ellis, 2012). However, these findings were not reflected in the opinions of the student and teacher participants. Both parties held a strong conviction that gender played no major role in learning English. The article concludes by outlining some implications for educational policy makers and foreign language teachers.

Keywords: gender, attainment, learning English as a foreign language

1. Introduction

Research into the relationship between second/foreign language learning and gender has witnessed a considerable change in the past three decades, as it has been informed by emerging conceptualizations of gender in language studies. Early research focused on sex-based differences in women's and men's

linguistic repertoire, viewing sex as a fixed, bipolar category which could be correlated with language and language learning. By contrast, later studies investigated the relationship between gender and speech patterns, defining *gender* as a dynamic characteristic grounded in social activities and contexts (cf. Ellis, 2012; Norton, 2000). The shift in perspective from *dominance* (Lakoff, 1975) and *difference* (Tannen, 1990) frameworks to *social constructivist* approaches (Ehrlich, 1997; Pavlenko & Piller, 2008) has prompted alternative accounts of differences in learners' language gains between the two gender groups. The basic assumption in both the dominance and difference theories is that women and men constitute static and internally-homogeneous groups and the main aim of researchers has been to identify and explain gender-specific features in their linguistic repertoire (cf. Ehrlich, 2007; Pavlenko & Piller, 2008). However, the two models offered different explanations for these differences. In the dominance approach theorized by Lakoff (1975), variability characterizing men's and women's linguistic practices was argued to reflect women's subordinate status with respect to men. Lakoff (1975) argued that linguistic forms typical of women's speech such as hedges, hypercorrect grammar, super-polite forms, question intonation in declarative contexts, or question tags exemplify the tentative and powerless nature of women's language, thus mirroring social hierarchies. Popular though Lakoff's (1975) theory was, it found no empirical justification in the studies conducted to test its claims (Coates, 1986). Yet, it inspired further research into gender differences in language (e.g., Coates, 1986; Trudgill, 1983). Less radical in nature than dominance theory, difference theory stated that women and men belong to different but equal cultures, which develop distinct *genderlects* as a result of socialization in the same-gender peer-groups (Pavlenko & Piller, 2008). This framework, popularized by Tannen (1990), helped to explain instances of language change spearheaded by women as rooted in their more frequent usage of incoming and standard forms than that of men (Labov, 1991; Trudgill, 1983).

These sociolinguistic conclusions led second/foreign language researchers to posit that women might be better than men at learning languages as they are more open to novel structures in the target language and eradicate the incorrect forms in their interlanguage more readily (Ellis, 2012). These hypotheses were confirmed in a longitudinal study conducted by Burstall (1975), who examined the overall achievement of 6,000 8-year-old British students of French. The results of the study showed unambiguously that girls outperformed boys. Similarly, in Boyle's (1987) study of Chinese students in Hong Kong, females earned significantly higher mean scores on general proficiency tests in English as a foreign language than did males. More recent studies yielded similar results

(e.g., Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Chavez, 2001; Field, 2000; Murphy, 2010). For example, Murphy (2010, p. 82) carried out a study in second-level Irish schools between 2003 and 2007 and reported that girls outperformed boys significantly in the achievement of higher grades (A, B, and C) in the Leaving Certificate Examination (LCE) higher level of French (5.4% of girls over boys), German (6.4%), and Spanish (4.3%). This consistent trend was also detected at the post-primary level. A possible explanation for the superiority of female learners is that girls show a higher level of attribution than boys. Michońska-Stadnik (2004) found that female students displayed a consistently higher level of internal attribution (ability, effort), and the girls in the researched group were more successful learners. Michońska-Stadnik's (2004) findings echo those of earlier research (e.g., Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Spolsky, 1989), which reported that female learners manifested stronger motivation to learn the target language and were more positively disposed towards it. Other studies, however, produced evidence indicating either no significant differences in overall language achievement between female and male learners, or that male learners are better than female learners at specific language skills. Bacon's (1992) study illustrates this point, as its results revealed no significant gender differences in listening tasks. The same results were obtained in Boyle's (1987) study, in which male learners outperformed female learners on listening vocabulary tests.

These conflicting outcomes demonstrated that dominance and difference theories failed to provide a satisfactory account of male/female differences in language use and learning. Consequently, these essentialised "gender polarities" (Ehrlich, 2007) were abandoned in favor of social constructionist approaches to language and gender, which emphasized the emerging and context-specific nature of the differences. Commenting on the shift in the conceptualization of gender, Pavlenko and Piller (2008, p. 58) convincingly argued that gender is "a socially constructed and dynamic system of power relations and discursive practices, rather than an intrinsic property of particular individuals," and further explained that

women and men are no longer seen as uniform natural categories where all members have common behavioral traits. Rather, these labels function as discursive categories imposed by society on individuals through a variety of gendering practices and accompanying ideologies about 'normative' ways of being a 'man' or a 'woman'.

This resulted in the assumption that if these practices are not fixed characteristics but rather social and cultural constructs indirectly linked with gender, individuals may create their gendered identities in different ways. Consequently, gendered

linguistic behavior may differ within individuals of the same sex in a given context (e.g., community, culture; cf. Ehrlich, 2008; Pavlenko & Piller, 2008).

Second/foreign language researchers adopted this line of reasoning assuming that there might be differences in learning success within gender groups depending on the particular social situation. Therefore, research has concentrated on what individuals *do*, not on who they *are* (Ehrlich, 2008). Some studies (e.g., Norton, 2000; Norton, Harper, & Burnaby, 1993), for example, demonstrated that the level of language proficiency among immigrant women learning English in Canada was generally poorer than that of men because of women's restricted access to interactional and educational opportunities. The women came from traditionally patriarchal families and faced a number of gate-keeping practices that often limited their access to English. Some women were reported to avoid attending second language courses due to their family responsibilities, lack of prior education, and the fact that their husbands disapproved of their wives being more educated (Norton et al., 1993). The study showed that women's second language linguistic repertoire reflected their engagement in a complex set of social practices rather than their intrinsic properties.

Apart from community power relations, other factors reported in the literature, such as group ideologies or stereotypical perceptions of some foreign languages, may affect the level of motivation to learn them. The decline in motivation to learn foreign languages among adolescent males as they progressed through the school system was reported by Williams, Burden, and Lavvers (2002), with this common tendency attributed to a general "switching off" from school-based learning. Male students were also reported to disrespect French, taught in Irish schools as a compulsory foreign language, as it was associated with a feminine subject and learning it clashed with the socio-cultural peer pressure among boys to conform to behaviors defined as masculine (Field, 2000). In contrast, the preference to learn German over French among Irish male students was related to "masculine" images of war or football they had of that language (Field, 2000; Williams et al., 2002).

The above discussion shows that the attempts to explain the influence of gender on learning a second/foreign language have switched in perspective from essentialism to social constructionism. Essentialists attempted to assess the extent to which linguistic differences in gender performance result from the static and fixed character of the two groups. However, research based on this assumption failed to provide data for consistent conclusions. These unsatisfactory results triggered new research based on the dynamic and heterogeneous nature of gender differences. Its results have suggested that language-learning trajectories of individuals are shaped by gendered social practices as well as culture-specific language ideologies, rather than the putative essence of femininity

or masculinity. This reconceptualization seems beneficial as it accounts for the complex nature of the relationship and thus promises more adequate conclusions for second/foreign language theoreticians and practitioners (cf. Dörnyei, 2009). However, research based on structuralist views cannot be discarded, for it focuses on *learning* rather than *learning opportunities* and emphasizes that learning must involve the utilization of linguistic resources (Ellis, 2012). Moreover, by focusing on defining linguistic repertoire of the two groups of speakers this approach provides a macro-analytic perspective. Another reason why essentialism cannot be neglected is that female and male speakers as social actors themselves use specific linguistic forms to organize their identities. Therefore, it would be theoretically naive to assume that some linguistic practices associated by researchers with boys or girls are available to both groups to the same extent. Such an assertion would ignore the existence of socially constructed boundaries which assign meaning to linguistic practice. Thus, speakers in different social positions have differential access to linguistic resources and therefore some degree of linguistic ownership should be acknowledged (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). That said, it is important to remember that research based on essentialism should not be abandoned as it may complement conclusions drawn from social constructivists' studies. In accord with the view advocating the importance of the traditional perspective, this paper presents the results of a study investigating the impact of gender on students' achievement in learning English as a foreign language in secondary and higher vocational schools in Poland, as well as teachers' and students' opinions concerning the importance of this influence. The presented results constitute a part of large-scale research exploring the relationship between students' social characteristics and attainment in learning English as a foreign language. This account focuses on the statistical rather than qualitative analysis of the study. This perspective was taken due to the relatively little data obtained from the questionnaires and interviews, which resulted from the fact that the respondents viewed gender as a weak predictor of students' success or failure in learning a foreign language in comparison with the other social factors that were investigated.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The subject pool comprised 549 students of English from Polish state schools and 64 foreign language teachers working in various locations within the country in a range of different teaching contexts. The student group consisted of: (a) 458 learners of English as a foreign language, attending the 0 (language profile),

first, second, and third (different profiles) grades of state high schools; (b) 66 second year tourism majors from a state higher school of vocational education; and (c) 25 second and third year English majors from a teacher training college. Group 1 and 2 provided data analyzed quantitatively, whereas Group 3 qualitatively (the interview). It should be noted that the high school and vocation college sample was selected by using random sampling (SRS; Dörnyei, 2009), which involved choosing members of the population¹ in an arbitrary way, whereas the college students were the researcher's students who had taken part in the pilot questionnaire and expressed their willingness to elaborate on their experience in the form of an interview. The fact that they had taken part in the pilot study was crucial in selecting them for the interviews for two reasons. First, they were familiar with the procedure, which increased their confidence and trust during the interview. Second, asking them the same questions at different times (time triangulation) increased the reliability of the research. Moreover, as teacher trainees, the students had already had some teaching experience and therefore were requested to supplement their personal accounts with observations as teachers.

In the teacher group, 23 participants were the researcher's colleagues who agreed to fill in the questionnaires and their colleagues whom they asked to take part in the study. It is worth mentioning that all of them expressed interest in or even enthusiasm about the study, which most likely motivated them to provide reliable data. The remaining 41 subjects were participants of an annual national conference for foreign language teachers. This event was selected due to the fact that teachers who take part in conferences are used to sharing their teaching experiences with others; consequently, they were expected to be willing to fill in questionnaires. The data obtained from the teacher questionnaire revealed that among the participating foreign language teachers there were 17 university teachers, 4 vocational college teachers, 25 teacher training college teachers, 11 high school teachers, and 1 junior high school teacher (6 with missing school level data). It should be noted that the average age of the teachers was 37.6, which might be indicative of the fact that they might have had a considerable amount of teaching experience. The teachers' gender was not considered, as it was of no relevance to the purpose of the present research.

As regards the overall language proficiency level of the student group, it was established on the basis of the records of the teacher who had worked with the learners on a regular basis in the form of an end-of-semester-grade added by the teacher to the student questionnaire once it had been completed. Judging by the grades, the students were generally good, as indicated by the grade

¹ The population of high school learners and vocational college students in Poland in the school year 2008/2009 was about 817 thousand (*Rocznik Statystyczny*, 2009).

point average which amounted to 3.93 for high school students and 3.53 for state higher school of vocational education students. It should be noted that the schools differed in the number of instruction hours of English per week. This, however, was not taken into account as it was of no relevance to the purpose of the research.

When it comes to the social diversity of the student participants, such was determined on the basis of the data obtained by the student questionnaire. The high school group consisted of 259 female students (56.5%) and 190 male students (41.5%).² Similar in terms of gender breakdown, the state higher school of vocational education group comprised 45 female students (68.2%) and 21 male students (31%). When it comes to age, most of the high school learners were between 16 and 18 years old (163 17-year-olds, 150 16-year-olds, 105 18-year-olds, which constituted 29%, 32% and 22.9% of the group, respectively), and 61 learners were 15 years old (13.3%). The youngest learner was 14 (0.2%) and the oldest learner was 20 (0.2%). Among the state higher school of vocational education students 29 were 20 years old (43%), 24 were 21 (36.4%), 8 were 22 (12.1%), 2 were 19 (3.0%), and one was 23 (1.3%).

2.2. Instruments

The instruments used to gather the data included a student self-report questionnaire, a teacher self-report questionnaire, and audio recordings of interviews with teacher trainees.

The aim of the student questionnaire was threefold. Firstly, it was to reveal information concerning the participants' social characteristics, such as, for example, age, gender, or family background. Secondly, it was to obtain information regarding their opinions about the influence of gender and other characteristics on learning English in the form of 5-point Likert scale statements such as this one: "Gender has an influence on foreign language learning success." The respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statements by circling one of the responses. Each response option was assigned a number: 5 = *strongly agree*, 4 = *agree*, 3 = *no opinion*, 2 = *disagree*, 1 = *strongly disagree*. This part also consisted of nine rank-ordering items focusing on the importance of gender and other social factors (e.g., place of residence, parents' education, family income) in language learning. The learners were asked to put them in a sequential arrangement in order to obtain data reflecting their opinion as to what the most and least important social factors in learning

² If the overall percentage of the data is less than 100, it indicates that the difference results from the missing data.

a foreign language were. Thirdly, the questionnaire was used to determine each participant's language proficiency level in the form of an end-of-semester grade given by the teacher. It contained a space where the teacher was asked to evaluate the student's progress in the form of an end-of-semester grade, expressed on a scale from 1 to 6 (1 was the lowest mark, 6 was the highest mark), once the test had been completed.

The teacher questionnaire was intended to obtain information concerning the teachers' opinions about the influence of gender and students' other social characteristics on learning English. It was composed of four parts. In the first part the teachers were queried regarding their age and the kind of school they worked in. The second and the third part of the teacher questionnaire were the same as the corresponding parts of the student questionnaire. In the fourth part, the subjects were expected to give a short account of an event in their teaching career in which the students' social factors influenced language teaching outcomes. In this way, they were expected to recall, consider and perhaps evaluate such events on the basis of observation, knowledge of learners and, first of all, teaching experience.

As regards the teacher trainee interviews, the participants were asked whether gender and other social factors (e.g., place of residence, parents' education, family financial status, etc.) influence learning English. It should be mentioned that a semi-structured, single session, and individual interview was selected because of its flexibility. On the one hand, it had a formalized character with a predetermined question to be asked during the interview. On the other hand, the semi-formal character of the event allowed the researcher to ask for explanations or encourage the interviewees to elaborate on some issues to benefit from its exploratory character (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 218). The additional questions asked during the interview included, for example: "I do not quite understand what you mean by saying that girls are sometimes better at learning languages, can you explain?"

2.3. Data analysis

To analyze the data, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods were used. The numerical data were analyzed in two ways. First, descriptive statistics were calculated to bring into focus general tendencies in the data. Second, the analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedure was employed to determine the significance of the differences in means between the groups. ANOVA was selected as the adequate procedure due to the fact that the analysis of gender was part of a larger project involving variables with more than two values (there were more than two groups to compare). It should also be noted that although

in the case of gender there were only two groups to compare, ANOVA was also applied instead of *t*-test statistics for practical reasons.³ Additionally, the strength of association was indicated by computing the effect size if a result turned out to be statistically significant (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 211). To ascertain whether statistically significant differences were present between students' and teachers' opinions concerning the influence of gender and the other social characteristics on language proficiency level, ANOVA procedures were performed after descriptive analysis was conducted. In addition, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to investigate the relationship between student and teacher rank evaluations of the importance of the influence of gender and other social characteristics on language proficiency. The statistical computations were done by means of the software tool SPSS (The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), version 17. The data which emerged from the teacher trainee interviews and teacher accounts were subjected to qualitative analysis via *constant comparison method* and *the three-level coding system (open, axial, selective)* based on *grounded theory*.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, both quantitative and qualitative data were subjected to some statistical procedures and methodological strategies. To assure the legitimization of quantitative outcomes, the split-half analyses were used. The reliability of students' and teachers' opinion questionnaires used in the research was verified by means of the split-half method (Brown & Rogers, 2009). When it comes to qualitative data, they were validated by employing triangulation techniques such as methodological triangulation (two data-gathering procedures, questionnaires and interviews, were used) and time triangulation (the conclusions were based on the questionnaires from the pilot study, March 2008, and the interviews, March 2009)

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative results

As demonstrated in Table 1, a one-way analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA) indicated that there was a significant difference in achievement between female students ($M = 3.99$, $SD = .97$) and male students ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.10$), $F(1, 506) = 9.26$, $p < .002$. The effect size was small ($\eta^2 = .02$).⁴ Given these results,

³ According to Dörnyei (2009, p. 218), ANOVA can be used with two groups, in which case the result will be the same as the corresponding *t* test.

⁴ According to Dörnyei (2009, p. 217), the accepted interpretation of η^2 is: .01 = small effect, .06 = moderate effect, and .14 = large effect.

the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant relationship between students' gender and their progress in foreign language learning was rejected.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and ANOVA for male versus female students' achievement in English (grade)

		Descriptive statistics				
Gender		<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Male		3.7115	208	1.10378		
Female		3.9933	300	.96941		
Total		3.8780	508	1.03483		
		ANOVA				
		<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Grade in English * Gender	Between groups (Combined)	9.754	1	9.754	9.257	.002
	Within groups	533.179	506	1.054		
	Total	542.933	507			
		Measures of association				
		<i>η</i>			<i>η</i> ²	
Grade in English * Gender		.134			.018	

When it comes to students' responses to Likert-scale items, as shown in Table 2, the average student rating was the highest for language practice in a country where the target language is spoken ($M = 4.49$, $SD = .80$) and the lowest for gender ($M = 1.69$, $SD = 1.00$), indicating the participants' strong conviction that language practice abroad has an influence on students' achievement, whereas gender plays no role in it.

The results were further verified by student rank evaluation of the social factors with reference to their influence on foreign language success, as demonstrated in Table 3. The numbers show that, in the opinion of most students (60%), language practice in the target language country is the most important social factor in foreign language learning success; and less than 10% of the respondents viewed the other factors as the most important ones. Gender is seen by most students (64%) as the least important social factor in language attainment and, in the opinion of less than 11% of the respondents, the remaining factors are the least important in shaping the process.

Table 2 Likert scale descriptive statistics for students' opinions concerning the influence of students' social characteristics on language attainment

Social factors	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>SD</i>
Place of residence (town/village)	3.3461	4	1.255
Living conditions (house/flat)	3.3550	4	1.127
Parents' attitude towards foreign language learning	3.5744	4	1.170
Family financial status	3.4218	4	1.147
Parents' occupation	2.3817	2	1.181
Parents' education	2.5201	2	1.215
Gender	1.6897	1	.997
Access to the Internet	3.7252	4	1.096
Language practice abroad	4.4943	5	.796

Table 3 Student rank evaluation of the importance of students' social characteristics for language attainment

Social factor	% marking the factor as the most important	Social factor	% marking the factor as the least important
Language practice abroad	60.04	Gender	64.47
Family financial status	9.85	Place of residence	10.87
Place of residence	6.95	Parents' occupation	6.60
Parents' attitude	6.37	Parents' education	5.63
Access to the Internet	5.79	Parents' attitude	3.11
Living conditions	3.86	Family financial status	2.91
Parents' education	3.09	Language practice abroad	2.72
Gender	2.12	Living conditions	2.33
Parents' occupation	1.93	Access to the Internet	1.36

Table 4 shows descriptive statistics for the Likert scale teachers' opinions concerning the influence of gender and other students' social characteristics on language attainment. As was the case with the average students rating, the average teacher rating was the highest for language practice in a country where the target language is spoken ($M = 4.50$, $SD = .85$) and the lowest for gender ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.30$), indicating the teachers' strong conviction that language practice abroad has a strong influence on students' achievement, whereas gender plays no role in it.

Table 4 Likert scale descriptive statistics for teachers' opinions concerning the influence of students' social characteristics on language attainment

Social factors	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>SD</i>
Place of residence (town/village)	3.8033	4	1.046
Living conditions (house/flat)	3.5833	4	1.062
Parents' attitude towards foreign language learning	4.2131	4	1.018
Family financial status	3.9672	4	.983
Parents' occupation	3.2295	3	1.371
Parents' education	3.6557	4	1.237
Gender	2.4590	2	1.298
Access to the Internet	3.5246	4	1.260
Language practice abroad	4.5000	5	.854

Table 5 Teacher rank evaluation of the importance of students' social characteristics for language attainment

Social factor	% marking the factor as the most important	Social factor	% marking the factor as the least important
Language practice abroad	32.20	Gender	64.47
Parents' attitude	25.42	Parents' occupation	10.87
Living conditions	10.17	Access to the Internet	6.60
Parents' education	8.47	Place of residence	5.63
Place of residence	8.47	Living conditions	3.11
Access to the Internet	6.78	Language practice abroad	2.91
Family financial status	6.78	Parents' education	2.72
Parents' occupation	1.69	Family financial status	2.33
Gender	0.00	Parents' attitude	1.36

The results concerning teachers' opinions were further verified by teacher rank evaluation of the social factors with reference to their influence on foreign language success, as presented in Table 5. The numbers indicate that next to language practice in the target language country (32% of the teachers), parents' attitude (25% of the teachers) was seen as the most important social factor in foreign language learning success. Less than 11% of the respondents saw all the other factors as the most important ones. Gender was seen by most teachers (52%) as the least important social factor in language attainment and, in the opinion of less than 11% of the respondents, the remaining factors were the least important in shaping the process. Similarly to the student group, the teachers were consistent in their opinions. Their answers to both Likert-scale items and rank-ordering questions showed that the strongest and the weakest

predictors of success in learning a foreign language were language practice abroad and gender, respectively.

In order to identify significant differences between student and teacher means (*SM*, student mean; *TM*, teacher mean), one-way ANOVA tests were performed. Significant differences were detected at the $p < .05$ level in the case of six of the nine factors tested. These factors were: place of residence ($SM = 3.35$, $TM = 3.80$), parents' attitude ($SM = 3.57$, $TM = 4.21$), family financial status ($SM = 3.42$, $TM = 3.97$), parents' occupation ($SM = 2.38$, $TM = 3.23$), parents' education ($SM = 2.52$, $TM = 3.66$), and gender ($SM = 1.69$, $TM = 2.46$). These findings demonstrate that the teacher means concerning family characteristics were higher than the student means, which shows that teachers were significantly more likely to agree that these factors influence language attainment.

The differences in student and teacher opinions as to which factors they found most important and least important in learning a foreign language were established on the basis of the rank evaluations presented in Tables 3 and 5. For easy comparison the same data are juxtaposed in Table 6. The high values of Pearson coefficients for student and teacher opinions concerning the most important (.77) and the least important (.98) factors in language attainment confirm that, generally, the groups did not differ significantly in their opinions.

Table 6 Student and teacher rank evaluation of most important and least important student characteristics in language attainment

Social factor	% marking the factor as the most important		Social factor	% marking the factor as the least important	
	Students	Teachers		Students	Teachers
Place of residence	6.95	8.47	Place of residence	10.87	8.62
Living conditions	3.86	10.17	Living conditions	2.33	6.90
Parents' attitude	6.37	25.42	Parents' attitude	3.11	1.72
Family financial status	9.85	6.78	Family financial status	2.91	3.45
Parents' occupation	1.93	1.69	Parents' occupation	6.60	10.34
Parents' education	3.09	8.47	Parents' education	5.63	3.45
Gender	2.12	0.00	Gender	64.47	51.72
Access to the Internet	5.79	6.78	Access to the Internet	1.36	8.62
Language practice abroad	60.04	32.20	Language practice abroad	2.72	5.17
Pearson's coefficient	.7688		Pearson's coefficient	.9822	

3.2. Qualitative results

The present subsection demonstrates the results of the data obtained from the student interviews and teacher questionnaires. The data were subjected to qualitative analysis which was executed by *constant comparative method* and *coding* so as to provide information concerning students' and teachers' opinions on the relationship between gender and learning outcomes. The multiple readings of students' and teachers' interview responses and categorization of each meaningful word, sentence or phrase into a unit became the basis for constructing a set of recurring themes representing students' opinions about the issue investigated. For most student respondents, gender has no impact on learning languages. They ascribe success in foreign language learning to personality, age and intelligence rather than sex differences, as can be seen from the extracts presented below:

Girls are said to be better at learning foreign languages. I don't know what makes them better. They might be more open, willing to talk and make friends, speak with foreigners, but apart from that I don't think there are any other reasons.

Boys feel the need to learn foreign languages at different age than girls, but I think it [gender] has no major impact.

Some participants said that girls are more diligent, hard-working and better organized than boys and that is why they often get better results. A few interviewees pointed out that boys are often better at passive language skills, such as listening. The general conclusions were, however, usually quite vague, based on general opinions. They often used expressions like: "*it is said,*" "*it is generally stated,*" "*it's hard to say,*" or "*girls seem to be . . .*" All of them were of the opinion that there are more girls in language classes and female language teachers, but the most common explanation for this observation was that "*there must be something to it.*"

The analyses of teachers' questionnaires revealed that gender was not mentioned in any of the reports of the events showing the influence of students' social characteristics on attainment. The absence of responses concerning gender might be due to general unwillingness to attribute success or failure in school to sex differences. In the culture that advocates political correctness and favours equal opportunity, teachers may find it difficult to discuss gender differences in learning a foreign language without entering the touchy area of sexism. What is more, they might not want to perpetuate gender-stereotyped attributions to success and failure in achievement and relay gendered expectations to students. This lack of data may also result from the nature of the open-ended questions, in which the respondents were not directly encouraged to refer to gender, as was the case with the interview.

4. Discussion

The statistical analysis of the data presented above revealed that girls achieved significantly better results than boys. This finding is consistent with early research conducted by Gardner and Lambert (1972), Burstall (1975), Boyle (1987), Spolsky (1989), and Murphy (2010), in which girls achieved higher overall means on second /foreign language proficiency tests than did boys. With regard to more recent studies, the quantitative part of the present study generally corroborates the findings of, for example, Field (2001), Chavez (2001), Carr and Pauwels (2006), Michońska-Stadnik (2006), and Murphy (2010). All of these studies revealed better performance of female students on tests measuring second/foreign language proficiency. The results of this study can be accounted for by evidence coming from sociolinguistics. It should be noted that, although conclusions drawn by sociolinguists were based on first language data, it is justifiable to draw parallels between first language and second/foreign language acquisition patterns as considerable empirical evidence has shown prominent similarities between the ways the two systems are acquired (Ellis, 2012). Upon examining gender-based differences in native-speaker speech, sociolinguists (e.g., Coates, 1986; Labov, 1991; Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1996; Trudgill, 1983) concluded that women are more open to new, incoming forms and, at the same time, use a higher frequency of standard or prestigious forms than do men. Adapting these conclusions to foreign language learning, it can be hypothesized that female learners reject interlanguage forms that are different from target-language norms, and incorporate new linguistic forms in the foreign/second language input more readily than do men (Ellis, 2012).

Taking into account these gender specific linguistic characteristics, it is evident that the education system is more suited for girls in the way that it approaches teaching in general, as well as in teaching foreign languages (cf. Chavez, 2001; Murphy, 2010). For example, all official foreign language tests are based on standard varieties, and, in the case of English, for example, it is either Standard British English or General American English. This school objective definitely reflects girls' linguistic preferences and therefore might work to their advantage. Moreover, male speakers are more likely to swear or employ slang expressions in their speech. School curricula for foreign languages favor standard languages as the most useful and commonly used varieties of a given language, and therefore they can be said to favor girls. Another possible explanation for the fact that female students outperform male students in learning a foreign language might be gender-specific ideologies (cf. Murphy, 2010; Pavlenko & Piller, 2008). Men's macho culture, as reflected in, for example, attaching little value to such skills as personal expression (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1990), might

affect boys' performance in school in that they would be reluctant to take part in oral activities or express their thoughts in writing tasks, and consequently miss a chance to practice their linguistic skills. Female culture, on the other hand, seems to lend itself more readily to co-operation and submission (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1990), which might result in more efficient and effective learning of girls.

However, the numerical findings were not reflected in the opinions of the student and teacher participants. Both parties held a strong conviction that gender played no major role in learning English. Moreover, they did not differ significantly in their opinions in ranking most/least significant social factors in learning the target language. Both groups were of the opinion that language practice abroad was the most important factor, whereas gender was the least important. As mentioned earlier, the discrepancy between the quantitative and qualitative findings of the study may result from the fact that in the qualitative part (the open questions and the interviews) the respondents either avoided giving definite answers or, as in the case of teachers, refrained from addressing the question altogether. However, more definite conclusions will only be possible if further research is conducted.

5. Conclusion

The results of the study provide a basis for certain general implications for educational policy-makers and foreign language teachers. With respect to policy makers, the results indicate that there is a need to officially recognize the gendered differences in foreign language learning by, for example, including specific testing procedures which would result in regular monitoring of gender differences in achievement and introducing new teaching and learning styles that would motivate boys to learn languages. This is especially important in the light of the fact that education system should create equal opportunities for each individual (OECD, 2009). As to the potential benefit to foreign language teachers, the results of the study serve to deepen teachers' understanding of classroom events as looking at them through social lenses makes language educators aware that the behavioral and classroom management problems they face may be related to gender as much as other factors, for example, cognitive abilities. Thus, the findings of the study might provide a basis for a critical evaluation of second/foreign language curricula, helping to formulate teaching goals and to select suitable teaching methods. Specifically, teachers may diminish the gender gap by employing teaching strategies which would improve the academic performance of boys. Moreover, educators may try to increase motivation, confidence and self-esteem among boys, help boys to organize their work more

effectively, change boys' perception regarding "feminine" subject such as English, challenge the general anti-learning attitude towards learning among boys, or simply use texts in which sub-standard expressions or examples relevant to boys' ideologies are used.

With regard to second/foreign language research, the outcomes of the research project reported in this article offer a window into the relationship between students' social characteristics and success in learning a foreign language, illuminating gender as the social factor that significantly influences attainment in language learning. The results show that social variables should not be neglected in exploring individual dimensions in second/foreign language learning. What is more, the conclusions of the study may constitute a basis for addressing additional research questions, such as, for example: How does gender impact achievement? Or how does gender influence other learner characteristics, for example, motivation or learning strategies? These are topics for future inquiry.

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