4
Gender and Motivation in EFL Vocabulary Production

Almudena Fernández Fontecha

Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore the possible connections between learners’ gender, motivation – and motivation types – and attainment in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lexical availability test. Among the variables affecting foreign language (FL) learning, gender and motivation have received extensive attention within this field.

Gender in language learning

The relationship between gender and language acquisition is a recurrent one in the literature. In the past decades, it has been approached from multiple angles, as illustrated in Sunderland’s (2000) review of issues in language and gender in second and foreign language education. Considerable research has suggested that while males are better than females in mathematics and visual-spatial abilities (Linn and Petersen, 1985; Hyde and Linn, 1988; Stumpf, 1995), females generally surpass males at verbal skills (Gordon and Lee, 1986; Boyle, 1987; Stumpf, 1995; Andreou et al., 2005; Kiss and Nikolov, 2005). Moreover, females remember words better than males (Kimura, 1999; Halpern, 2000; Maitland et al., 2004); they exhibit superiority in producing more words of a certain type in a limited period of time (Herlitz et al., 1999; Larsson et al., 2003); and they are also superior in reading tasks (Chavez, 2001). This female verbal advantage appears quite early in first language acquisition, but in many cases it disappears with age (see Ullman et al., 2008; Wallentin, 2009). Despite many results pointing to a general trend of female advantage in language-related tasks, counterevidence is also found. For example, Hyde and Linn (1988) conducted a meta-analysis of 165 studies on L1 verbal skills which showed significant gender differences only in one
third of the studies. For a critical review of the results of the investigation of sex differences in language performance and in brain structure and processing as well as in language-related disorders, see Wallentin (2009) and Ullman et al. (2008).

Concerning the relationship between gender and FL vocabulary acquisition, studies are scanty and diverse (see Jiménez and Ojeda, 2010). Most research based on different selections of the group of Spanish EFL learners to which the sample of our study belongs reports a female advantage in FL vocabulary, specifically in types of words and semantic fields (Ojeda and Jiménez, 2007; Jiménez and Ojeda, 2008; Jiménez and Ojeda, 2010) in the quantity of words understood and produced (Ojeda and Jiménez, 2007; Jiménez and Ojeda, 2008; Jiménez and Terrazas, 2005–2006); or in the lesser number of lexical errors produced by girls (Agustín, 2007; 2009). Gender-based differences are also reported in word association (Jiménez and Moreno, 2004). However, contradictory results are also obtained: focused on this group of Spanish EFL learners, Agustín and Terrazas (2008a; 2008b) did not observe significant gender-based differences in FL receptive vocabulary; and Agustín (in this volume) perceived no gender effect in the amount of lexical creations or in the order of frequency in which these types appear in writing tasks. In other studies on FL vocabulary tasks or vocabulary-dependent skills, Phakiti (2003) obtained no gender-based differences in FL reading comprehension performance; and Scarcella and Zimmerman (1998) reported a male advantage in a vocabulary task. Then, despite the identification of some general pattern favouring females both in linguistic skills and FL learning, the existence of counterevidence should at least serve to question the value of gender as a differentiating variable (Schmenk, 2004:517–518). In relation to this idea, the words below by Norton and Pavlenko (2004:504) can contribute to explaining the role of gender in language learning:

nor do we assume that gender is always relevant to understanding language learning outcomes. Instead, we recognize that gender, as one of many important facets of social identity, interacts with race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, age, and social status in framing students’ language learning experiences, trajectories, and outcomes.

Motivation in language learning
Since the emergence of Gardner and Lambert’s (1972) socio-psychological model, language learning motivation has been an ever-present topic in second and foreign language research. In Gardner’s