

2008

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### Recommended Citation

Feery, Karen (2008) "Current Perspectives on the Role of Gender in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Research," *The ITB Journal*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 4.

doi:10.21427/D7DB3H

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/itbj/vol9/iss1/4>

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# **Current Perspectives on the Role of Gender in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Research**

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## ***Abstract***

*This paper outlines current perspectives on the role of gender in second language acquisition (SLA) research. Neither a singular field of research relating specifically to gender and SLA nor a theory of gender and SLA exist as yet. However, the distinct and well-established fields of language and gender studies and the field of SLA strongly underpin this topic area and a gradual emergence of research relating specifically to the role of gender in SLA is evident.*

## **Introduction**

In attempting to form an accurate overview of current perspectives on the role of gender in SLA research, a number of significant observations must be made from the outset. First and foremost, it must be pointed out that there is no singular distinct field of gender and SLA as yet. Following an examination of research based on the past thirty years or so within the fields of language and gender studies and of SLA, it can be concluded that the topic area of gender and SLA is essentially informed by these two distinct and well-established fields. Similarly, a singular theory of gender and SLA has also not been formulated to date. That is not to say that there is little interest in the relationship between the two or that research to this end is quiescent. A certain amount of research has been undertaken in the past ten to fifteen years or so relating specifically to the potential relationship between the two variables and this will be outlined in due course. Before we examine this latest research, however, it is worth taking a brief look at the key areas that are framing this particular topic area beginning with the field of language and gender studies.

## **Language and Gender Studies: An Overview of Key Models and Traditions**

The current field of language and gender studies has come a long way since its inception over thirty years ago, although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact time language and gender as a unit became an independent area of research or indeed to identify a single key research question that resulted in its establishment as a viable area of study. During this time it has taken many twists and turns and continues to be a dynamic and ever-growing area of research today. Traditionally speaking however, research into the relationship between language and gender has mainly centred on language *usage* (primarily L1) and gender as opposed to language *learning*, (which for the most part denotes L2) and gender.

By examining the kind of theorising that has surrounded the historical relationship between language and gender we can gain an insight into, and understanding of this relationship. However, a neatly defined chronology of language and gender models from the 1970s to the present day is not possible, as one model or theory was not

sequentially replaced by another. If we are to categorise some of the research that was to come on a linguistic analysis level specifically, then it can be said that empirical studies on language and gender appear to have fallen into two categories, variationist studies, which focus on actual linguistic gender patterns and associated factors and interactional studies, which concentrate on language use in interaction.

### **1970s: An Emerging Feminist Critique of Language and the Deficit Framework**

Beginning with 1970s, research into feminist linguistics flourished during this time and gradually a feminist critique of language usage began to emerge. Some powerful feminist literature appeared at the beginning of this decade marking the beginning of a major discussion about the relationship between gender and language. Publications such as Roszak and Roszak's *Masculine/Feminine: Readings in Sexual Mythology and the Liberation of Women* (1969) and Robin Morgan's edited collection entitled *Sisterhood is powerful: An Anthology of writings from the women's liberation movement* (1970) typified the calibre of feminist literature emergent at this time. Other works in the same tradition include Gornick and Moran's *Women in Sexist Society* (1971) and Firestone's landmark text, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970). Like the aforementioned publications, the last of these deals with the feminist crusade towards egalitarianism. However, unlike these books, some of the contributors to this particular body of work have looked particularly at the relationship between language and gender as well as the social construction of woman, a subject that was to become the basis for more modern-day discussion in the field of language and gender research.

Using as their basis this emerging feminist critique of language, researchers began to expand the original quest for evidence of differences in male and female language use. One of the main approaches associated with this decade was the Deficit Model of language and gender which essentially labelled women's language as deficient when compared to the norm, which was men's language (Lakoff, 1975). This model was criticised for overgeneralising and automatically accepting only a right and a wrong way to speak with no allowance for diversity. Researchers also sought to explore possible reasons to explain these differences, such as early sex role development and its potential influence on language (Lakoff, 1975). Other issues researched included male dominance within interactional situations (Fishman, 1978, 1983 and Spender 1980), gender-linked variation and use of prestige forms (Trudgill, 1972) and female linguistic behaviour (Trömel-Plötz, 1978).

### **1980s: Dominance Models and the Concept of Speech Communities in Language**

As the 1970s drew to a close, its main legacy was the establishment of the field of language and gender research in its own right. The 1980s proved to be just as productive as the 1970s in this field and this decade not only saw the consolidation of work carried out in the previous decade, but it also experienced new research questions and directions. It saw the emergence of another framework known as the Dominance Model, which in essence, is based on the assumption that men dominate women through discourse and looks at the whole area of power relations and powerlessness in terms of female linguistic strategies. Although research associated with the dominance

framework was already evident in the 1970s e.g. Zimmermann and West (1973), and indeed even Lakoff (1975) believed both traditions to be closely linked, a seminal publication which appeared at the start of the decade by Dale Spender (1980) is perhaps most closely associated with the dominance tradition and examines the notion of the existence of man-made language. This approach was also exemplified by various studies from Pamela Fishman which dealt with talk between heterosexual couples (1978, 1980, 1983) and which suggests that inequality and hierarchy are the causes of any problems in cross-sex interaction. Although the dominance model has its shortcomings, it does consider the importance of the situational context in analysing language and gender, a variable to which language and gender are inextricably bound, as without social context, both variables lose much of their meaning.

Other research that came to the fore during this decade looked at the social function of gossip in all-female discourse and explored the notion of co-operativeness in female speech styles (Cameron and Coates, 1988). One of the key achievements of this research was the firm establishment of the concept of speech communities and of the role of language in constructing social meaning within such communities. This kind of research also laid the foundations for more recent constructs of language and gender research informed by speech community theory, including the community of practice approach which we will address shortly.

### **1990s to today: The Difference Framework and the Community of Practice Approach**

Over the past 15 to 20 years, language and gender research has become even more dynamic and diverse. The dawn of the age of political correctness in the early '90s in some ways kick-started the whole area of feminist linguistics by changing the cultural context within which many old and new questions could be raised such as the notion of sexist discourse. It had the effect of rising the human conscience in western societies on an ethical level and feminist linguistics had much to offer during this time pointing out offensive and exclusionary language often relating to both ethnic and gender concerns.

During the 1990s a third model, the Difference Model gained substantial ground. This particular approach moved away from notions of deficiency and hierarchy towards one that is based on the notion that communication between the sexes is in fact communication between male and female sub-cultures. One of the main proponents of this view is Deborah Tannen and the reception and interpretation of her writings has been startling to say the least. Effectively her books became part of the self-help genre and appealed greatly to the general public but were widely criticised in academic circles as they were seen to stereotype and dichotomise women and men even further. Critics of this kind of approach also highlighted the dangers of neglecting the heterogeneity of men and women's speech and as such we began to see a more speech community-based approach to language and gender that would examine particular groups of men and women.

One such approach is the Community of Practice Model. Although it is first and foremost a theory of learning, it has been have applied within a language and gender context since the 1990s by Penny Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, in particular in their research into adolescent communities and gender identity construction. Unlike

preceding models, this approach proposes that discussions of gender should only take place within certain communities of practice, allowing for intra-category diversity. As the decade progressed language and gender research became characterised by a move towards more social constructionist views with modern concepts of gender frequently associated with 'doing' gender or 'performing' gender. This perspective regards gender as a social construct in its own right and one which contributes to the construction, reconstruction and co-construction of gender identity.

Having outlined the scope of the field of language and gender studies, let us turn our attention now to the field of SLA research and look at how it contributes to the question of the relationship between gender and SLA.

### **The Field of SLA Research**

The field of second language acquisition (SLA) has perhaps become the largest area of academic enquiry within the greater domain of modern-day linguistics. Indeed, all over the world vast amounts of time, energy and money are invested into learning a second language on a daily basis, so research into the various processes and approaches to teaching and learning a second language is both justified and necessary.

A number of schools of thought constitute this vast area of research and have influenced key theoretical approaches towards SLA. The main perspectives that have come to the fore are Universal Grammar-based approaches, cognitive information-processing models of SLA, interactionist approaches and sociocultural perspectives respectively. Over the past decade or so, interest in the sociocultural framework has gained a lot of ground in SLA research, but no singular theory of SLA dominates the field at present.

### **Social Factors and the SLA Process**

The kind of factors that have been considered within the remit of SLA research to date are diverse with interest focussing on areas such as mental ability and the learning processes of the human mind, motivational and attitudinal factors and the complexities of understanding a foreign culture. In their outline of key components that play a role in SLA, Asher and Simpson (1994, 3,723) draw attention to four main areas "(a) the target language; (b) the input that the learner actually receives in the course of acquisition; (c) the linguistic or other relevant knowledge the learner brings to the learning task; and (d) the learning mechanism(s) that the learner is equipped with."

In terms of SLA theories that have been advanced over the years, (b), (c) and (d) have been contemplated in various ways. For instance, the input that the learner actually receives in the course of the acquisition is a matter, taken up by Ellis (1985, 1990, 1997) amongst others, and it refers to samples of oral and written language that the learner is exposed to while he or she is learning or using a second language. Linguistic knowledge that the learner brings to the learning task and learning mechanisms that the learner possesses most probably refer to the potential influence of L1 acquisition on L2 acquisition and are apparent in Chomskyan arguments. It is however the "other relevant knowledge" that the learner may bring to the learning task that is of particular consequence to arguments that imply that other influences such as cultural, social,

historical influences, amongst many others, all contribute to who and what the learner is and what prior knowledge he or she brings to the task of learning a second language.

The role of social factors in SLA has been of interest since the early days of research<sup>12</sup> in the field, albeit in varying degrees, however over the past two decades a significant amount of SLA research has taken a more social orientation. Not only do such theories take into account the social environment within which learning takes place and the process of learning itself, they also contemplate the learner's engagement with both. The two main strands of research that have taken this direction are the interactionist tradition and sociocultural theory. Although both are socially-oriented they are different from one another with the latter proving particularly popular at present.

The interactionist tradition, effectively, takes into account the role of SL input, SL output and SL interaction amongst L2 learners. Within this perspective, interactions in which the learners engage are regarded as a source of target language input and it proposes a link between interaction and input and L2 comprehension and acquisition. Unlike previous SLA approaches, this kind of perspective moves away from consideration of the individual learner and his or her mental faculties and abilities for SLA towards consideration of the learner now situated and contextualised and allows for inclusion of influences external to the learner. It is, however, important to note that theories in the cognitive and mentalist tradition have not entirely ignored interaction either. Emphasising the learner's Language Acquisition Device (LAD), such positions maintain that the learner only needs minimal exposure to input in order for acquisition to be triggered.

In terms of the sociocultural framework, at a glance, it implies a hybrid concept that would necessarily include consideration of the social and the cultural, but as one of the main proponents of the Vygotskian tradition, James Lantolf (cited in Lantolf and Thorne, 2006, 1) explains

*despite the label "sociocultural" the theory is not a theory of the social or of the cultural aspects of human existence ...it is, rather, ... a theory of mind ... that recognizes the central role that social relationships and culturally constructed artifacts play in organizing uniquely human forms of thinking.*

It is also worth noting that sociocultural theory is not an actual theory of SLA but it is currently being applied and researched within the SLA context. Johnson (cf. 2004, 170f) proposes an alternative model for SLA based on sociocultural theory in which she views this framework as a means of linking the mental world with the social world when examining learning processes and sets out the aim of her proposed model of SLA in the sociocultural tradition as follows:

*In sum, the ultimate purpose of this dialogically based model of SLA is to discover the processes that allow the L2 learner to become an active participant in the target language culture, or to investigate how participation in a variety of local sociocultural contexts affects the learner's second language ability and how participation in one sociocultural context affects the learner's participation in another.*

(Johnson, 2004, 176)

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<sup>12</sup>Research pertaining to the role of social factors in SLA includes Schumann (1986) and Gardner (1979, 1985) amongst others.

In terms of the implications of this perspective for SLA, it goes beyond being a merely socially-oriented theory addressing the topic of construction, reconstruction and co-construction of identities by individuals through language, issues which have also gained prominence in the field of language and gender studies in recent times. Despite the growth and diversity within the field of SLA, no singular theory of SLA appears to have achieved dominance in the field and it remains a dynamic and vibrant area of research. Having achieved an insight into the theories and models advanced thus far, we will now take a look at what role, if any, gender has played within the field of SLA itself.

### **Gender in SLA Research**

When we talk of SLA research relating to the gender variable, it is often included amongst SLA research relating to similar variables like age, race, ethnicity, personality and so on. There has been some research which has examined the effect of such variables on the SLA process notably the effect of age on the L2 learner and the L2 learner's personality. For instance, Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991, chapter 6) dedicate an entire chapter to the consideration of the effect of what they term "individual variables" on SLA as opposed to "native language variables", "input variables" and "instructional variables" which they deal with extensively in the other chapters of their book relating to SLA research. In principle, consideration of these individual variables should allow for inclusion and consideration of variables like gender as it also includes social-psychological factors such as motivation, attitude, cognitive styles and learning strategies. Under 'other factors', the category of sex also features, albeit briefly, amongst factors that have been claimed to influence SLA, although they assert that they "know of no study that has systematically investigated the rate of SLA in females versus males" but they do indicate some studies<sup>13</sup> that "have reported sex-related differences incidental to their main focus" (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991, 204).

Earlier we reviewed the field of research that constitutes language and gender studies and noted that the various paradigms it has advanced attempt to explain possible differences between male and female language usage; however, they primarily relate to the L1 and to its usage as opposed to language learning. In reviewing the material produced in that field, the absence of specific reference to the relationship between L2 learning and gender is noticeable.

Similarly, whilst reviewing SLA theories and general SLA research, one notices that they seldom give specific consideration to the potential role and influence of other variables, such as gender, within SLA. It is clear that both the field of SLA research and language and gender studies share common ground and if this is the case, then this common ground has to have implications for both fields and therefore that the relationship between gender and language learning, whether L1 or L2, must be considered by both. Understanding how males and females use their own native language and a second language may point to possible differences, but it only goes part

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<sup>13</sup> The studies highlighted by Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) pertaining to the possible effect of gender on SLA are those by Farhady (1982) and Eisenstein (1982). They also cite Robin Lakoff's notion of 'women's language' and research into conversational behaviour and gender by Zimmermann and West (1973) and Gass and Varonis (1986).

of the way to facilitating our understanding about SLA processes and its development in men and women. This is not to say that without the specific consideration of the variable gender within SLA or of language learning within language and gender studies that these fields are redundant in their findings rather, they need to take up the common challenges presented by each.

As mentioned earlier, there has been a gradual emergence of SLA research relating specifically to the gender variable over the course of the past ten to fifteen years. Based on research carried out so far, this can be further divided into two main streams. The first is characterised by research that has focussed on performance-related differences between the sexes, on gender-differentiated use of L2 learning strategies and on the notion of language learning as being a particularly female activity.

The second stream represents a trend towards consideration of more social constructionist views of language and gender within SLA research. In particular, a range of studies have been carried out that have shifted consideration of the L2 learner towards the social location of the learner and the L2 learner's social identity. There has also been practical application of the community of practice construct within the L2 classroom.

### **An Overview of Research into Gender-related Differences in SLA Performance**

Looking at the first of these two streams, Kettemann et al (1998) provide a comprehensive overview of research into possible gender-related differences in foreign language acquisition and they examine which theories may explain any such differences. The overview concentrates on performance-related differences but there is some brief discussion around differences unrelated to performance. In terms of performance-related differences, a number of studies are outlined showing how females fare compared to their male counterparts in second language tests in different European countries at both primary and secondary level. For the most part, girls achieved higher marks in various language tests, but not in all cases. In terms of differences unrelated to performance, Kettemann et al (1998, 14f) zone in on three different aspects: the popularity of language subjects amongst boys and girls, the kinds of learning strategies used by both sexes and the differences in their overall attitudes towards learning a foreign language.

With regards to the kinds of learning strategies employed by boys and girls, Ludwig (1983) could not find any difference in the kinds of strategies used, whereas Bacon and Finnemann (1992) did. Differences were also noted regarding boys' and girls' motivations for learning a language. According to Ludwig (1983), boys chose a foreign language for practical reasons, whereas girls chose it because it seemed interesting. In terms of overall attitudes towards learning a foreign language, Kettemann et al concluded that attitudes appear to be more positive amongst females when compared to males. Schröder (1996) reported a more positive attitude to foreign language learning amongst girls in terms of their greater desire to learn other foreign languages and to improve their existing knowledge of a foreign language. Baumert (1992) reached a similar conclusion and noted that the level of interest in foreign languages was greater in co-educational classes. Kettemann et al (1998, 16f) also attempt to explain why gender-related differences might exist at all. Ultimately, they suggest three different approaches when it comes to categorising the possible reasons for these differences: a

biological stance, a cognitive-psychological approach and a socialisation theory-based approach.

The true value of the aforementioned studies is difficult to quantify as it is hard to isolate exactly what their findings are. As a singular effect or several systematic influences of gender in SLA are not necessarily identified across such studies, it is difficult to know how best to utilise the information they provide. However, further specific consideration has been given within SLA research to the types of language learning strategies that both teachers and learners employ when teaching and learning a second language. In some instances, this has been extended to include examination of the correlation between choice of such strategies and gender.

### **Gender-differentiated Use of L2 Learning Strategies**

O'Malley and Chamot's *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition* (1990) makes an important contribution to this aspect of SLA with its presentation of instructional models for learning-strategy training for teachers. Essentially, it describes how a second language is learned and the role learning strategies have in the SLA process. It is centred on a cognitive information processing view of language, exploring the role of cognition in learning and is largely based on work by cognitive researchers such as John Anderson in relation to ACT\* Theory. It also looks at studies in which L2 students have been trained to use learning strategies and ultimately advances instructional models for ESL in which learning strategies and direct instruction in learning play an important role. Interestingly, O'Malley and Chamot's work has not been limited to the field of SLA but has crossed into learning strategies in mathematics and social studies as well. Of particular significance is the emphasis placed upon the effect of student characteristics on instruction in learning strategies. As O'Malley and Chamot (1990, 160) explain

*Characteristics such as motivation, aptitude or effectiveness as a learner, age, sex, prior education and cultural background, and learning style may play an important role in the receptiveness of students to learning strategy training and in their ability to acquire new learning strategies.*

Not only is emphasis placed on individual learner characteristics in relation to their choice of language strategy but they also call for consideration of such characteristics when designing learning strategy instruction, something that may or may not be practicable.

From the learner's perspective, Rebecca Oxford's 1993 study attempts to take this a step further and identifies the potential link between the use of certain learning strategies and gender. Essentially this study has two objectives. Firstly, it attempts to establish whether or not there exist gender differences between learning styles and learning strategies and secondly, it examines the potential implications of such differences for foreign language instruction. Regarding gender differences in learning styles, Oxford (1993, 75) concluded that gender was not found to be the source of such conflict but it did have a role to play

*All these conflicts involved a difference in gender between the student and the instructor. Most instances of conflicts did not specifically cite gender as a major issue. However, when style battles occurred between a teacher and student of different genders, the frustration level and inability to communicate appeared to be higher than*

*when the style conflicts were single-gender. [...] a style conflict was often [...] exacerbated by a gender-related communication block.*

Oxford goes on to suggest ways of identifying and dealing with style issues including those that are not gender-related. Four suggestions are made in total. In brief they propose assessment of styles and familiarising students with their own styles, acceptance of gender-related differences and highlighting of cross-gender similarities in style, use of style data by teachers to tailor-make instructional techniques and finally, preparation of the learning environment to accommodate a variety of styles regardless of the learner's gender.

In her exploration of gender differences in learning strategies, Oxford (1993, 81ff) looks beyond L2 research as well as within the field itself. Gender differences were found in frequency of strategy use, with females using particular strategies more often than males. The range of strategies employed by females was also wider than those employed by males. It is noted that the choice of L2 learning strategy is often gender-linked and that this is influenced by the learner's preferred L2 learning style, which is also often gender-linked (cf. Oxford, 1993, 81)<sup>14</sup>. Consideration is also duly given to the implications of these results for the L2 classroom and a number of suggestions are made similar to those regarding learning styles. Oxford (cf. 1993, 84f) recommends assessment of students' strategy use by teachers and that students become acquainted with their own strategy use. To facilitate students' decision-making in terms of style and strategy usage, style and strategy training could be provided.

Looking at the value of this kind of research, first and foremost, it is an example of research within the field of SLA that has specifically included consideration of the gender variable. Another significant conclusion to be drawn from this kind of research is that it has shifted emphasis towards the learner and the significance of their individual learner characteristics in an SLA scenario. That is not to say that the most significant aspect of SLA is gender or vice versa. Rather, it goes some way to looking at the quintessentially social and humanistic nature that learning a second language entails. There has however, been criticism of the inclusion of such specifics like gender with regards to their implications for SLA research, as highlighted by Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991, 214)

*Progress in understanding SLA will not be made simply by identifying more and more variables that are thought to influence language learners. We have certainly witnessed the lengthening of taxonomies of language-learner characteristics over the years, and we doubtless will want to continue to add to the lists. However, it is not clear that we have come any closer to unravelling the mysteries of SLA now than before. Perhaps what will serve the field best at this point is setting our sights higher: attempting to explain SLA, rather than merely describing it.*

Larsen-Freeman and Long (cf. 1991, 221f) place this kind of criticism in context within the field of SLA research by explaining that many are frustrated with the lack of conclusive findings that this kind of descriptive research offers i.e. exploratory and correlational studies and they suggest that more attention be paid to the role and value of specific theories that motivate and underpin certain kinds of SLA research. Possibly, researchers are also concerned about the potential practical implications and difficulties

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<sup>14</sup> For further discussion on gender differences in L2 learning strategies cf. Oxford and Ehrman (1988).

one might encounter when attempting to incorporate such variables into the actual teaching and learning process.

This kind of criticism is not completely dissimilar to that directed at language and gender research which examines micro-perspectives of variation, such as critics of the community of practice approach and the suggestion that generalisations too cannot be ignored. Although it must be said the field of SLA boasts more theoretical underpinnings and positions than the field of language and gender, perhaps due to its potentially wide-scale application in educational terms the world over, there is greater need for concern over the practical implications of teaching strategies to students and the possible implications this might have for subsequent testing of their linguistic proficiency. It is, however, par for the course that when one chooses to examine linguistic variation details must also be given due consideration as well as general patterns. Within both fields of research, there is both a need for, and scope for, research that functions at a macro and at a micro level in the hope that they will complement one another and together highlight perspectives of equal significance to their respective fields. Finally, within this first stream of research related to gender and SLA, there is also evidence of the notion of language learning being a specifically female activity being addressed.

### **The „Female Business“ of Language Learning**

As many involved in learning or teaching a language will confirm, language classes and language personnel are frequently dominated by greater numbers of females rather than males. Does this mean that languages are in effect a female domain? Some research has attempted to address this question.

Loulidi (1989) poses the question *Is language learning really a “female business”?* In understanding Loulidi’s findings, it is important to be cognisant of the context within which this research is written. A growing imbalance in languages in the UK on a number of levels is indicated here. Not only are the numbers of students learning a foreign language falling at all stages of education, but there is a distinct imbalance within the dwindling numbers of the amount of males and females learning a foreign language, with more females opting for languages. This information is based on findings from a Department of Education and Science Consultative Paper in 1983 in the UK. To this end, Loulidi (1989, 202) deduces that language learning is increasingly becoming a “female business” in the UK. She is, however, quick to refute any suggestion that females are better language learners than males or that languages themselves are a feminine phenomenon.

Although she does not examine this same question in great detail, Schmenk (2002) also speaks of two different phenomena being present when one talks of gender-specific SLA, namely the old adage that females are better language learners than males and the fact that more females choose to study and teach foreign languages. While we have all come across these two phenomena at some point or other, Schmenk makes the interesting point that science and mathematics in particular is perceived as male-dominated but that the field handles their gender bias differently than the field of SLA. That is to say within the sciences a female minority as a problem is almost always regarded as a problem whereas a female majority in SLA and SL education is seldom regarded as a problem.

Let us turn our attention now towards the second stream of research identified earlier which is characterised by a more social constructionist perspective beginning with the practical application of the Community of Practice approach in a SLA context.

### **SLA, Gender and the Language Classroom**

Unlike some of the research into gender and SLA that we have seen thus far, Allyson Julé's 2004 study does not exclusively focus on specific learner characteristics but encompasses other factors such as identity construction, power relations, the role of the classroom and the practices that take place within the classroom. In particular it looks at gender participation, or lack thereof, in the SLA process specifically within the language classroom. It investigates the construction of gendered behaviours by examining teaching approaches and at how some students, depending on their gender, often get more (or less) access to 'linguistic space' or particular opportunities to talk in the classroom by the teacher or through their teaching methods. By examining classroom talk and silence, Julé believes that language use can elucidate SLA processes in relation to gender. Not only are male and female language learners part of the equation here but Julé also questions the possible influence of teaching methods on their participation in the language classroom. She highlights evidence provided by researchers<sup>15</sup> over the years that suggests that both male and female teachers tend to pay less attention to female students than to male students and that this in turn can effectively "gender" the classroom either by discouraging or encouraging student participation in the language classroom.

Based on the data she has gathered from her research, Julé (cf. 2004, 42) suggests that through both speech patterns and silence, the girls in the L2 classroom have been constructed by the practices, situations and events of the classroom and they have also individually participated in constructing them. In conclusion, Julé proposes that language teachers, specifically ESL teachers in this case, need to be aware of the complexity of relationships in the language classroom and that they should structure their classes so that language 'opportunities' are being created for girls as well as for boys. Julé's research is of particular interest as it represents an example of the application in an SLA context of the community of practice construct advanced by Lave and Wenger (1991) mentioned earlier in the context of language and gender studies. She points out that ESL research has become

*firmly attached to issues of social construction, seeing the individual experience as deeply rooted in local contexts and relationships [and that] any given ESL learner may be understood as part of a 'system of culturally constructed relations of power, produced and reproduced in interactions' (Gal, 1991, p.176). The ESL student experience is currently understood as a 'positioning' and therefore intimately related to the personal relationships and local cultures or 'communities of practice'.*  
(Julé, 2004, 53f)

Within the social constructionist perspectives of language, gender and language learning, one can observe an increasing amount of research, particularly over the past ten to fifteen years, into the social construction of social identities, notably gender

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<sup>15</sup> Researchers included in this discussion were Dewey (1938), Stubbs (1976), Clarricoates (1978), Delamont (1980), Adelman (1981), Mahony (1985), Graddol and Swann (1989), Thompson (1989), Paechter (1998), Swann (1998) and Thornborrow (2002).

identities in relation to SLA. These offer a fascinating insight into the realistic and sometimes painful situations in which L2 learners find themselves during the course of their SLA development and to the challenges and opportunities they encounter whilst learning a second language. Let us take a look now at some examples of this kind of research and at what it has to offer our discussion here.

### **The Social Construction of Learner Identities in SLA and Gender Research**

This newer strand of research is more concerned with the social location of the learner and the learner's social identity. In her discussion of the language learner and the significance of the learner's characteristics, Susan Ehrlich (in Pavlenko et al, 2001, 103) outlines how some researchers even criticise the validity of the term "learner" itself

*Theories of second language acquisition have often assumed an idealized, abstract learner devoid of social positioning and removed from the social environment within which learning takes place. Indeed Rampton (1991:241) points to the „ubiquity of the phrase“ „the learner“, arguing that such a phrase implies a ‚normal‘ or ‚natural‘ course of second language development that exists outside of a social context. In a similar way, Kramsch and von Hoene (1995: 336) have critiqued what they call the ‚reductionist view of the social context of language‘ that informs most communicative approaches to language teaching. Such a view assumes a „generic taxonomy of predetermined ‚learners‘ needs and situations with predetermined scripts“ (Kramsch and von Hoene 1995: 336) without regard for the particularities of learners' social identities. That the social location of learners can have a profound effect on learning outcomes is not itself a new insight.*

Although this might merely seem like criticism of neglecting the gender variable within SLA, this last point extends this criticism of disregard of individual learner characteristics to include disregard of social variables such as age, race, class, gender, ethnicity and so on that contribute to the construction of the learner's various social identities. These variables are omnipresent in any learning situation. A number of interesting studies have been carried out, particularly over the course of the past decade, that have focussed on students learning a second language and the affect of their 'social location' on their SLA development. In particular, Susan Ehrlich (1997 and in Pavlenko et al, 2001) outlines a number of studies and attempts to illustrate how social categories such as gender can play a pivotal role in the second language acquisition process.

One such study by Polanyi (1995) offers an interesting perspective on how gendered social practices have possible consequences for proficiency and SLA outcomes. This particular study was based on an examination of journals kept by American university students who were on a study-abroad programme in Russia. One of the findings was that Russian men regularly subjected the female students to sexual harassment. Understandably, the students felt humiliated, degraded and in some instances, they stopped trying to communicate their protests as it was falling on deaf ears. Polanyi (cited in Ehrlich, 1997, 434), points out that such experiences may "crucially affect the foreign language input which learners receive and the types of output they must learn to produce." The point being made by Polanyi is that although the female students were indeed learning the L2, the nature of their experiences wasn't the kind of L2 that would usually be examined. Clearly, in such a situation, the students' exposure and access to

the L2 is constrained by the gendered social practices of the target culture community in which they found themselves.

Ehrlich also outlines a similar study conducted by Kline (1993) into the social practices of literary students studying abroad in France. The female students' experience was very similar to the previous study and the consequence was that many students sought refuge instead in reading, thus improving this particular skill. But it is not just studies focussing on sexual harassment that are considered here. Other studies where men and women have different exposure to, different access to, or different attitudes to, the L2, particularly in bilingual or multilingual settings, are also outlined and again, highlight the ubiquitous and influential nature of gender and differing gendered social practices on the SLA process and on proficiency outcomes for the learner.

For instance, Harvey (1994, in Ehrlich, 1997, 431) explored how men and women use Quechua, an indigenous language in southern Peru and Spanish, the former colonial language of Peru differently. He found that just under half of the women could only speak Quechua and a limited amount of Spanish, while the majority of men were bilingual or spoke Spanish, which was heavily influenced by Quechua. The main reason for this difference was due to their different levels of exposure to Spanish. Significantly though, women were also choosing to resist learning Spanish as there were "severe social costs" associated with it as it could lead to them becoming objects of derision and ridicule within the culture. So in effect, the female members of this community chose to reject the social identity associated with being a Spanish speaker and this, in turn, had a clear and direct effect on their proficiency level achieved in Spanish.

In other communities quite a different role is expected of women whereby they assume the role of the "cultural broker" as outlined by a range of other studies<sup>16</sup> cited in Ehrlich (1997, 432). In such instances, some of these studies found that women are both the protectors and conservators of a traditional language and the leaders or innovators of the L2 depending on their community. Based on these studies, it is not merely being a man or being a woman in the target culture that affects the students learning outcomes, but rather the discursive and social practices that constitute being a man or being a woman in that particular society, the choices and social identities the learner is presented with and whether or not the learner chooses to resist or assimilate such identities. As Teutsch-Dwyer (in Pavlenko et al, 2001, 178) points out, sometimes "both genders need to reinvent themselves to fit their new realities; however, the pressures may be much higher on some individuals than others."

These studies and others in a similar vein highlight the significance of the learner's access to social networks and of the effect of a learner's marginalisation within such networks on their L2 development. This suggests that the learning process is not separable from such social variables or the social situation of the learner as has been outlined above. It is not sufficient to consider the learner and the learning context but to look at the many layers and combination of experiences the learner can be presented with in the course of their second language development, regardless of whether this

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Medicine (1987) for a discussion of the role that women assume in Native American communities, Zentella's (1987) study of Puerto Rican women in New York City and Burton (1994) for a discussion of how women are expected to assume the role of 'guardian' of traditional language and culture.

learning and development takes place in their own country, in the target country or elsewhere. In many ways these studies criticise the standardised nature of traditional notions of proficiency that don't take into account differential learning experiences which is an area we will examine further in chapter four.

On top of these two streams of research, other elements of gender-related research in SLA have taken task with certain aspects of the social constructionist stance and with the way in which the gender variable is utilised in SLA research. There is also evidence of calls for multilingualism, SLA and gender to become a new interdisciplinary field of research in its own right.

### **Reframing Gender within the Gender and SLA Equation**

Regarding the first of these, Barbara Schmenk (2002) has provided a very interesting and complex discussion on gender and SLA. Throughout her research, Schmenk suggests that, according to most studies available on gender and SLA, gender has only been regarded as a learner variable and a personality variable within SLA research. This is similar to how we saw gender described and criticised by Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) earlier and is true of some of the research we have seen so far. In general, Schmenk remarks that although ample findings are provided by studies such as those by Kettemann et al (1998), they are not uniform in their results; in fact, some are contradictory and at best can be viewed as diverse. She also suggests that there is a tendency to ignore the possible influence of gender on SLA in these studies and instead to rely on pre-existing stereotypical dichotomies about men and women which invite further polarisation of both sexes which effectively belong to the difference tradition. Schmenk voiced this criticism in other more recent research where she points out that “difference approaches are inherently context- and culture-blind because they regard gender as a static, context-free category” (Schmenk, 2004, 514). Effectively, the strongest conclusion she is willing to make from these studies is that “the gender of the learner per se has not got a systematic influence on SLA.” (Schmenk, 2002, 118).

Schmenk takes her criticisms a step further, however, by criticising the way in which more general SLA textbooks such as that by Freeman and Long (1991) and Ellis (1994) have appropriated this kind of research and for the lack of conclusions they have attempted to draw about it. The conclusion she has drawn herself (cited above), is not acknowledged in many popular SLA textbooks and Schmenk suggests that the absence of other conclusions being drawn has the effect of further popularising and deepening pre-existing myths about differences between men and women in SLA. Other researchers within the field of language and gender studies, most notably Bergvall et al (1996, 3f), have also criticised the persistence of dichotomies in the field, asking

*How much of this apparent dichotomy is imposed by the questions themselves? Although researchers studying language and gender are generally sensitive to the power of language, the traditional questions have tended to reinforce rather than to weaken the prevailing female-male dichotomy?*

Schmenk (cf. 2002, 121f) goes so far as to term the current situation of research into gender and SLA as dissatisfactory, something she attributes to the gender variable and how it is interpreted and understood rather than actual SLA theories being posited. Subsequently, she proposes that the question of gender and SLA needs to be reframed and that ‘gender’ needs to be reconceived in order for progress to be made. To this end,

she turns toward the construction of gender within SLA as a new point of departure. In this vein, she manages to integrate the value of biological views with more social constructionist views. This is particularly interesting as much of the research offered within language and gender research over the last ten years advocates the social constructionist view as an alternative to the essentialist stance and not as something that is an extension of it or that can be considered in conjunction with it.

Essentially, Schmenk posits gender as a “sinnstiftendes diskursives Konstrukt” (Schmenk, 2002, 231) (transl: a discursive construct that generates meaning). This would portray gender as a complex cultural coded system that generates and ascribes meaning and order, not as something found in a human being that merely shows meanings or simply as a learner variable, but ultimately as an analytical category. As gender has always been perceived as a binary variable, Schmenk claims that this emerges in research as well, offering basic criticism of the difference approach. She is critical of data that is forthcoming from gender and SLA research claiming it to be frequently unclear what exactly is being measured and what relevance it has to the SLA process and to gender and SLA research in general. In more recent research, Schmenk (2004, 514) again criticises how the difference approach is still being felt in SLA and that now other researchers in the field

*[...] conceive of language learners' identities as contested sites and argue for developing an enhanced framework for studying gender and its meaning within particular communities of practice. [...] Instead of looking at what males are like and what females are like and constructing generalized images of male and female language learners accordingly, critical voices note that language learners are themselves constantly constructing and reconstructing their identities in specific contexts and communities.*

To a certain extent, some of these criticisms have already been taken up in some SLA research. As we saw within the studies outlined by Ehrlich in the previous section, focus is not merely on gender being the dividing variable in a group or on seeking out gendered characteristics. Rather there is evidence that researchers are still employing the gender variable for analysis but in a different sense. Instead, we see how variables like gender affect the learner's social location, their access to social networks in the target culture and the influence of gender on the social practices of these networks and communities.

### **Towards the Future Development of Gender and SLA Research: Multilingualism, SLA and Gender as a New Interdisciplinary Field Of Research**

Finally, in other areas of SLA research there have been calls for the establishment of multilingualism, second language learning (SLL) and gender as a new interdisciplinary field of research in its own right. A key publication appeared in 2001 entitled *Towards the Future Development of Gender and SLA Research: Multilingualism, SLA and Gender as a New Interdisciplinary Field Of Research* stemming from a shared interest in SLA and language and gender studies and a realisation that this interest was not commonplace in academic circles. In the introductory section of this collection, two very important issues pertaining to both the field of SLA research and to that of language and gender research are identified, namely “gender-blindness” in SLA research and “monolingual bias” in language and gender research (cf. Piller and Pavlenko in Pavlenko et al, 2001, 1f). Essentially, these two issues are strong criticisms of both fields, forming the very foundation upon which this book is based.

Piller and Pavlenko (in Pavlenko et al, 2001, 3) call for SLA research to become “more context-sensitive” and to treat gender as “a system of social relations and discursive practices whose meaning varies across speech communities.” The second issue at play here is the so-called monolingual bias in the field of language and gender research. Whilst the level of research carried out in this area in recent years is lauded, they do criticise its lack of consideration of second language learners and bilinguals. This, they claim, is attributed to the fact that a lot of language and gender research is US-based, which in turn represents a monolingual bias in its own right of (cf. Pavlenko et al, 2001, 2).

It is important to acknowledge that this publication does not represent new groundbreaking theories on language learning and gender specifically, but rather that the contributors are attempting to officially “write second language learning (SLL) and multilingualism into the theory of language and gender and to adopt recent developments in the field of language and gender for the study for multilingualism and SLL.” (cf. Pavlenko and Piller in Pavlenko et al, 2001, 17). Effectively, it represents a different approach to this area and its multilingual dimension sets it apart from recent research on language learning and gender carried out since the 1990s. Some of the research directions highlighted by Pavlenko et al (2001) have already begun to be addressed within the context of research. Such proposals for new research indicate growing diversification within the field and to a continued interest in the areas common to SLA, language and gender.

## Conclusion

While the issues addressed throughout this paper are only some of many currently being tackled within the fields of SLA, sociolinguistics and language and gender studies, it has helped illuminate some of the current themes central to SLA and gender. Each of the variables of language, SLA and gender are regarded as being fluid and very complex in their nature. In spite of this their complexity and their interrelatedness is very real and therefore cannot be simply disregarded. The study of social and sociological dimensions of the SLA process and of language and gender being undertaken suggest a number of possible directions for future research relating to the role of gender in SLA. There is a need to investigate the processes that contribute to the L2 learner becoming more proficient or not as the case may be in the L2. To this end, further research into SLA approaches is necessary that can encompass social relations and a more holistic view of the speaker and the learner not just in terms of how they speak but who they are, what they do, where they do it and how they define themselves.

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