

Examining the effects of gender on second language writing proficiency of Iranian EFL students: Descriptive vs. opinion one-paragraph essay

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Abstract-This study was an attempt to compare both genders in terms of proficiency in writing descriptive and opinion one paragraph essay. To this end 60 participants (30 male and 30 female participants) were selected among 90 participants through a proficiency test, titled as *Interchange Placement Test* developed by Richards and Lesley (2007). The participants were divided into two groups of females and males and were asked to write several one-paragraph essays—descriptive and opinion paragraphs—on the given topics in order to determine their level of writing proficiency at the pre-test stage. After instruction the participants took four other writing topics, two topics on the descriptive issues and two on opinion topics in order to determine their progress during the treatment period of 10 sessions of writing instruction. The results of the study indicated the superiority of learning writing skill of male participants on opinion one-paragraph essay and superiority of female participants on descriptive one. In effect, conducting t-test led to significant difference between both genders in writing descriptive versus opinion one-paragraph essay.

Key words-Opinion paragraph, descriptive paragraph, essay, writing

1. INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that learning a foreign language is so complicated that a range of different factors and variables should be considered in the process of learning a foreign language (Gorjian, Pazhakh & Parang, 2012). One of the sociocultural issues shaped by different learners in the process of learning a language including writing is the concept of gender. Gender is a concept that contributes different linguistic strategies to both genders based on context. It means that the concept of gender implicitly presents the social and contextual expectations each society put on part of each gender culturally as well as socially.

Recent studies showed a close relationship between building identity and gender. In fact, it is assumed that the writing of any person revealed their identity based on their gender (Gorjian, Pazhakh & Naghizadeh, 2012). In effect, some scholars (e.g., Gorjian, Pazhakh & Parang, 2012) investigated some writing features related to women in literary genre and expressive writing style; and interestingly they concluded that there is a close relationship between writing and gender (Amanda, 2010; Francis, Robson & Read, 2001). In fact, it is assumed that female students often perform better than their male counterparts in subjects as English Language and Literature whereas, some studies showed the assertiveness of males (Swan, 1992), other studies

attributed greater verbal abilities to females (Halpern, 1986). In fact, female students tend to be more capable readers and writers in comparison to male students. For example, Mahony (1985), Spender and Sarah (1980) or Swann (1992) in their studies argued on the superiority of females to males in terms of verbal ability. Halpern (1986) emphasized on the verbal ability of females too. He continued that verbal ability is measured through different tests such as word fluency, grammar, spelling, vocabulary as well as reading. Halpern discussed that contrary to the issue that during preschool, the verbal ability differences between female and male students are not consistent; but during adolescence, these are females who show better verbal performance.

In some situations in Iran, students rarely write in English because of some reasons like fear of making mistakes because of proficiency, judgment by the teacher or other students, and the teachers' negative feedback. This study explored the relationship between gender and descriptive and opinion writing performance of intermediate English as foreign language learners (Gorjian, Alipour, & Saffarian, 2012). The main purpose of this study was to investigate and study the impact of the gender on writing performance of the learners.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

It seems that most students of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) find writing difficult. In fact these EFL/ESL students are afraid of writing because writing challenges them in expressing their identities. In other words, writing, according to Ivanic (1998), "consist not only of 'subject matter' but also of the writer's portrayal of himself or herself, the reader, their relationship, the writer's commitment to the ideational content, their assessment of the reader's knowledge and beliefs" (pp. 94-95), and even the writer's gender. Furthermore, it seems that gender is an issue comes in conflict with other factors as identity. In fact, the issue of gender has a demanding role in conveying the identity of person behind writing.

Although most of people have difficulties in writing in second language; it is the role of the teacher to guide the learners looking at writing both as product (i.e. where the learner imitates, copies, and transforms models of correct language) and as a process (i.e. the cognitive processes which competent writers go through in order to achieve their objectives in a text). It is worth mentioning that writing is also a tool for survival since second language learners may need to write in second language; if they want to communicate with native or non-native speakers of that language. Therefore, writing is essential for EFL learners to keep contact with people of other societies.

Accordingly, it is crucial that teachers be aware of the demanding role played by gender in writing performance. Subsequently, this study endeavors to investigate the relationship between gender and writing performance on descriptive and opinion paragraphs among male and female students in order to determine the influence of gender on their writing performances. In effect, the writings of both genders are investigated and compared in terms of syntactic complexity, vocabulary diversity, as well as genre and methods of presenting arguments. In effect, the study aimed to answer these questions: Does gender affect EFL learners' writing performance on descriptive and opinion paragraphs?

Language is a crucial instrument for challenging and reflecting the social positions of both females and males (Weatherall, 2002). The language used by people is determined by social classifications as gender, social class, age, ethnicity, education etc (Muto-Humphrey, 2005). Contrary to the fact that language is assumed as a neutral communicative vehicle; language used to transmit different norms, values and attitudes. It is evident that our ideas and feelings about the world are molded and manipulated through Language; though the relationship between language, thought and reality is not clear. One of issues attracted the attention of many researchers is the relationship between society and individuals. In fact, language is a means through which gender differences depict diverse social as well as linguistic aspects of the life in any society. Furthermore, language is a crucial instrument in socializing children as well as in conveying gender-related (Ansaey & Babaii, 2003).

Gender is a concept that allocates different linguistic strategies to males and females according to context. It means that "the concept of gender denotes the social and contextual expectations each society determines based on cultural and social perspectives" (Esmaili, 2011). The study of gender and language differences constitute an

area of study within that take into considerations issues as varieties of speech associated with a particular, or social norms for such gendered language use. Attention to the relationships between language and gender as a domain of study emerged during the 1960s and 1970s with three books: *Male/Female Language* (Key, 1975), *Language and Women's Place* (Lakoff, 1975), and *Difference and Dominance* (Thorne & Henley, 1975).

The study of the relationship between gender and language began with Lakoff's 1975 book, titled as *Language and Woman's Place*. Lakoff, in the book, identified "women's register" that served as a means for maintaining women's inferior role in society. It is noted that women manipulate and use the linguistic forms, such as, and "weak", to reflect and reinforce a subordinate role in comparison to men. In addition, the language used by women, according to Lakoff (1975), is representative of the way in which the women are treated in society as well as the way they are expected to behave. Furthermore, it is argued that the language, specific to women, is not standard enough compared to men's. In fact, she considered women's language as "inferior to men's language, which she described as direct, clear and succinct" (Weatherall, 2002, p. 57). O'Barr and Atkins (1980) investigated the difference between both genders in terms of the language used in terms of linguistic differences observed between females and males who witnessed in the court. To this end, they focused on the 10 features suggested by Lakoff (1975) as "women's language". In effect, they investigated 159 hours of trials in 30 months. Their findings showed "women's language" as the language of "powerlessness". Interestingly, their findings didn't associate the 10 features, offered by Lakoff, to women. In fact, they claim that both genders made use of the ten features. In other words, they concluded that gender is not a determining factor on the language used by both females and males; instead they proposed that the 10 features are used by both genders who had low social status; because there were numerous instances in which the speeches of men showed more frequency of the 10 features comparing the ones observed in the speech of women, for example the frequency of the features in the speech of one of the female witnesses who was a doctor was less than that of a male witness who was the driver of an ambulance. In addition, O'Barr and Atkins (1980), in their study suggested that the previous experiences are another crucial factor in determining the language used by witnesses in the court. In fact, O'Barr and Atkins (1980) did not support Lakoff's view regarding the 10 features as specific to the language used by women; they instead suggested "powerless language" as a better term.

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants

Participants in the present study were chosen among 150 BA students of Islamic Azad University of Ahvaz whose major is teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). The research population was 120 males and females who formed four groups. To have a

homogeneous population of participants, a language proficiency test entitled “*Interchange Language Placement Test*” developed by (Jack C. Richards & Tay Lesley, 2007) will be administered to 120 students to indicate their level of proficiency and also their homogeneity level. Then, 80 subjects whose scores will be one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean will be chosen. The pre-test stage will indicate their level of writing proficiency on writing one paragraph essays of descriptive and opinion texts. Subjects will be randomly divided into two groups (i.e. groups male and female A and male and female B). Each group will be divided into two groups (each 60 male and 60 female subjects). Then each group will be divided into two groups (30 males and 30 females). Groups male and female A will be instructed through writing descriptive essays while groups' male and female B will receive instructions on writing opinion essays. The material includes the “*College Writing*” developed by (Zemach & Rumisek, 2003).

3.2. Instrumentation

Several instruments were utilized in the process of the development of the present research. Initially, the subjects in two groups took a test in order to determine their homogeneity of the groups regarding their levels of proficiency at intermediate level based on “*Interchange Language Placement Test*” extracted from (Jack C. Richards & Tay Lesley, 2007). The rationale behind adopting this test for the purpose of the study was that it was one of the available standardized tests compatible with Iranian second language learners. Its reliability coefficient was met through Cronbach Alpha. The second test was a pre-test and post test to measure the students' linguistic abilities. These tests were administered to see if there will be improvement in the proficiency level of language learners writing ability before and after treatment. Then the results of these two tests were compared by using *t*-test.

3.3. Procedure

At the beginning, in order to determine the level of proficiency of language learners in terms of writing composition and to make a homogenous group, they were given a homogeneity test by using “*Richards'(2007) Interchange Language Placement Test*”). The average mean of the scores were calculated. The general purpose of this study was determining the impact of the gender on learner's writing ability. To this end, subjects were divided into two groups (descriptive vs. opinion), then each group was divided into two groups (indeed four groups: male and female). The number of subjects in each group was 40 (20 males and 20 females). Descriptive group was instructed on writing descriptive essays while the other one received instructions on writing opinion essays. The whole research project took place in four sessions to instruct and practice writing essays for each group. Finally, one session dedicated to

writing descriptive essay and opinion essay separately for each group. Generally, two groups received four topics for writing essays in four sessions. In order to determine whether the gender had any effect on Iranian EFL learner's writing ability, learners' essays of the two groups were compared with “*Writing College Essay's checklist*” developed by (Zemach & Rumisek, 2003) of writing essay to see which group showed more progress in post-test writing treatment. The time was equal for all participants. Finally, an Independent Samples *t*-test analysis was run in order to find out whether the significant difference between the groups.

Descriptive demographic variables were assessed for each participant in this study and include: gender, age, current status (TEFL student, university); type of institution in each group; nature of experience pursued in the university (student); level of study. The dependent variables for this study were the perceptions of output and process goals associated with the gender. Output goals focused on various outcomes of writing achievements associated with gender; process goals attend to the mechanisms each gender use in pursuit of those outcomes. It is worth emphasizing that the rubrics were chosen in order to ensure reliability. In other words, rubrics dealt with need to be analytic, topic-specific to make the scoring of the writings more objective by different raters and the same rate on different times. Furthermore, the writings of the students were evaluated in terms of several common features of academic writing syntactic complexity, means of integrating cited information, and methods of presenting arguments. In addition, the writings were scored by three scorers who are graduate students and specialized in scoring the writings.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and the achieved data indicated gender to be a demanding issue in writing proficiency in descriptive and opinion one-paragraph essay. Considering the fact that both genders were homogeneous in general and writing proficiency test, and contrary to the fact that both female and male groups went through the same instruction but the results of different post instruction writing tasks as well as the results of the independent *t*-tests indicted to the role played by gender in writing proficiency. Hence, the results showed the homogeneity between and among groups in terms of language proficiency but the observed differences between both female and male groups revealed something about the role played by gender in writing descriptive versus opinion one-paragraph essay.

In effect, the differences observed between the writing proficiency of both genders on two descriptive and opinion one-paragraph essay writing tasks shed light on the biological differences between both genders. In other words, some differences were observed between the writing performance of both genders on descriptive and opinion paragraphs. Table 1 shows the differences between both genders on different tests:

Table 1. Statistics for differences between genders

Females vs. males	N	Mean difference	df	Std. Deviation	t	P
Pre-test	50	-.65000	49	1.32059	-2.696	0.12
Post-test	50	1.38	49	1.01	6.28	0.000

Significant at (p<0.05)

Table 1 shows insignificant differences between the means of the female and male participants on the related pre-instruction writing tasks indicating the high homogeneity in terms of the writing proficiency.

In effect, contrary to the insignificant difference between the both female and male groups in writing proficiency on descriptive as well as opinion essay before instruction; the results of the writing tasks of female and male groups after instruction showed significant difference between the both groups. In other words, the findings of the study may be discussed through the previous studies and findings in which the linguistic differences between the both genders are represented in their language achievements (O'Barr & Atkins, 1980). Considering the similar social status between the both female and male groups, the findings of the study obtained the results not in harmony to the claims of O'Barr and Atkins (1980) in which they assumed that both genders use the 10 features claimed by Lakoff (1975) in the same way. This might be interpreted in two ways: both groups are similar in everything but they applied different linguistic features in their writings because of their gender. Accordingly, this interpretation may support Lakoff's (1975) view in which females and males' language were distinguished and in which the males considered to be more dominant in opinion and ideas-related issues, and females in description and expressing the details and adjective or colors related to a description (Zhang, Wang, Wu, & Huo, 2011). It is worth mentioning that this kind of interpretation is more in harmony with the findings of the present study. In another interpretation considering the attitudes of O'Barr and Atkins (1980) the differences observed in the writing tasks of both genders rooted in past experiences of participants which seem not to be in harmony at least with the findings of this study.

5. CONCLUSION

The major intent of this study was to investigate the influence of gender on language proficiency. This study revealed gender as a demanding issue in the writing proficiency on different domains. In effect, the results of the study showed that gender is influential in the meaning that males are more powerful writers on opinion-related subjects because of their empowerment in expressing their opinions and ideas. In other words, male participants are more powerful on opinion writings because of their dominating discourse. Male participants, because of their dominance and their direct, clear and succinct discourse (Weatherall, 2002), were depicted to be more comfortable in expressing their ideas and opinion. In addition, the findings of the study showed the superiority of females in depicting descriptive topics (Zhang & Wu, 2011a, 2011b). Considering the fact that women use more inferior discourse and their power in using some particular language characteristics such as

lexical hedges or fillers, tag questions, empty adjectives, precise color terms, intensifiers, as well as emphatic stress (Lakoff, 1975); the females' power in descriptive one-paragraph essay writing is explicable. The findings of this research suggest that a good language teacher needs to adopt a critical outlook towards the role played by gender on profanely of learners in writing on different genres and topics (Zhang, & Wu, 2008). Moreover, the findings of this study insist that teachers develop professional knowledge and expertise by reflection and self-analysis. For instance teachers may pay attention to the achievements of both female and male learners by considering the genre and topics of writing.

Furthermore, it is recommended that education programs provide teachers strategies by which they can handle the shortcomings behind gender role on writing proficiency of female and male learners. In fact, teachers are expected to ask themselves how for instance this particular topic is presented by both genders. The findings of this study may also be of interest for policy makers since the effects of gender on the writing proficiency of learners should be considered in order to prevent from biased treatment.

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Vitae

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