

# LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: A “GIRLS’ DOMAIN”? FEMALE AND MALE STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE LEARNING

Larisa Nikitina  
Fumitaka Furuoka

Universiti Malaysia Sabah  
larisa@ums.edu.my  
fumitaka@ums.edu.my

## Abstract

*Substantial research has been done on gender differences in relation to various aspects of learning and teaching. In the field of language learning learner’s gender and its relationship with emotional (affective) components of language study has been a subject of numerous academic inquiries. These studies have focused on female and male students’ motivational patterns, classroom behaviour, conceptions of teacher-student interaction, etc. However, research on beliefs about language learning from the gender perspective has been lacking. The present study aims to address this gap and examines beliefs held by one hundred seven students learning a foreign (Russian) language at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). The participants were asked to respond to questionnaires after which the obtained data were computed and the statistical analysis was performed to assess whether the male and female students’ beliefs about language learning were significantly different. Pedagogical implications of the research findings are briefly discussed.*

*Key words: language teaching and learning, student gender, language learning beliefs, the Russian language.*

## 1. Introduction

A number of research studies in the field of language learning have focused on gender differences in the language classroom. For example, Oxford and Ehrman (1995) examined learning styles and strategies from the gender perspective, Murphy (1980) explored relationship between the student’s gender and his or her academic achievement, Sunderland (1998) investigated influences of the student’s gender on the patterns of teacher-student classroom interaction.

Some studies employed the gender perspective to examine the affective aspect of language learning. Thus, the researchers have explored such topics as gender differences in motivation to learn a new language (Mori and Gobel, 2006), female and male students’ attitudes towards language learning (Diab, 2000) and the target language culture (Wright, 1999), attitudes of the female and male students towards learning a particular foreign language, such as English and French (Dewaele, 2005; Shaaban and Ghaith, 2003).

However, among this multitude of academic inquiries there is a conspicuous lack of studies that focus solely on the gender differences in students' language learning beliefs.

In the 1980s, Elaine Horwitz of the University of Texas (USA) initiated a research on language learning beliefs. She developed several versions of the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) which were used in a number of academic inquiries that followed her pioneering study. Language educators realize that beliefs that adult language learners bring into the language classroom may be "inherited" from their previous social and educational experiences. As Norton (2000, p.132) maintains, language teaching and learning is "a complex social practice that engages the identities of language learners."

The current paper views language learning as a social experience where the students' previous experiences as learners and individuals are of great significance. This study recognizes a fact that a person's gender is an inalienable part of one's identity and that gender awareness is shaped through the individual's various past and present experiences. Based on these premises, the present study aims to explore whether language learning beliefs of the female and male language learners are significantly different. And, if they indeed are different, this inquiry aims to find out in which areas those beliefs diverge and/or converge most. Implications that the research findings may have on the organization of the language classroom and the language pedagogy are briefly discussed.

## **2. Literature Review**

For several decades, an issue whether gender differences are inborn (biological) or environmentally conditioned has attracted much attention and generated extensive academic debate. Different and opposing views and theories have been presented. Some academics take a position that gender differences are culturally shaped and defined by the individual's sense of oneself as "masculine" or "feminine", and that gender identity is not fixed and can be in a state of a constant flux (Butler, 1990; Humm, 1989; Weedon, 1987). The current paper takes a position that an individual's gender is not a fixed determinant (as opposed to the biological characteristics) and that within a particular cultural, social or educational milieu an individual may assume a "masculine" or a "feminine" mode of comportment depending on the circumstances and the social context.

In similar vein, a student's behaviour is invariably influenced by his or her previous social and educational experiences. Also, language educators and researchers have considered a possibility that attitudes and notions about language learning can differ according to the students' gender. It has been suggested that "from early childhood, girls may learn to meet problems through social communication, while boys may learn to meet problems by spatial exploration and independent action" (Anastasi, 1985, p. 22 cited in Dewaele, 2005).

The language classroom has a unique socio-educational environment. It is a place where the learners need to speak and to interact with the classmates considerably more than they might be required while learning other subjects. It is reasonable to propose that due to this stress on social interaction the language classroom has been described as a "girls'

domain” (Sunderland, 1998). Also, a number of studies reported that girls tend to outperform boys in language learning (Powell and Batters, 1985), which could be due to a fact that girls comport themselves differently from boys (Sunderland, 1998). This may include employing specific language learning strategies, possessing particular attitudes towards the learning situation and the language under study, and subscribing to specific beliefs about language learning.

Of particular interest and significance to the current study is research on language learning beliefs that approaches the issue from the gender perspective. Among such academic inquiries are Diab’s (2006) and Siebert’s (2003) studies. Diab investigated language learning beliefs of 284 Lebanese students (57 percent males and 43 percent females) who learned English as a foreign language in three universities. Statistically significant gender-related differences in the beliefs were reported in Diab’s study in two instances only. Thus, the female students’ motivation to learn French as well as their confidence to use the language were higher compared to the males’.

Siebert (2003) conducted a research among foreign students at various USA colleges. The participants were 155 learners of English (91 males and 64 females) from a variety of countries (*eg.* Chile, China, Indonesia, Japan, Kuwait, Laos, Taiwan, Thailand, etc.). The study reported some gender-related differences. The greatest differences in language learning beliefs between the male and female students related to the approach to language learning and the strategy use. Also, the male students possessed a greater linguistic self-confidence and estimated their ability to learn the language higher than did the female students. At the same time, the male learners in Siebert’s research tended to underestimate the length of time needed to master the English language.

### **3. Research Method**

#### ***3.1. Participants***

Participants in the current study were 107 students learning Russian at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). Among them, 60.7% (n=65) were female students and 39.3% (n=42) were male students, which reflects the student gender composition at Malaysian universities. The majority of the respondents were science students (71%, n=76).

The majority of the participants were from the following ethnic groups: Chinese (42.1%, n=45), Kadazan (15.0%, n=16), Malays (14%, n=15), Indians (10.3%, n=11), while the representatives of other ethnic groups (*i.e.*, Bajau, Bajau-Dusun, Sino-Kadazan, Sino-Dusun, Bidayuh, and Iban) made up 18.7% (n=20). As for the mother tongue, the majority of the respondents (45.8%, n=49) listed various Chinese dialects as their main language of communication; this was followed by the Malay language (26%, n=28), Indian languages (10.3%, n=11), Kadazan (9.3%, n=10), and others (8.4%, n=9). The majority of the students could speak three (39.3%, n=41), four (21.5%, n=23) or five (14.0%, n=15) languages and/or dialects.

### **3.2. Instrument**

Horwitz's Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI, 1988) was employed as a research instrument. This particular BALLI (1988) was developed to assess the learners' beliefs about foreign language study. It employs a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" answers. The instrument used in the current study also included questions that sought information about the respondents' demographic profile.

The 34 statements in the BALLI are divided into the following five themes, (1) foreign language aptitude; (2) difficulty of language learning; (3) motivation and expectations; (4) learning and communication strategies; (5) the nature of language learning.

To reflect this study context, minor changes had been done to the original BALLI statements. Thus, the expression "the English language" in some questionnaire items (BALLI statements 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 18, 27, 28, 31) was changed to "the Russian language", and the word "Malaysians" was used instead of "Americans" (items 30, 33).

### **3.3. Procedure**

The survey took place during the last class of the second semester of the academic year 2005/2006. The forms were distributed in the original language (English); each student received one questionnaire. Upon completion, the forms were returned to the lecturer.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

Two-independent-samples t-test was used to analyze the data. This t-test is suitable for empirical analyses where the samples are independent (i.e., not related) entities. In the current research, the female and male populations were approached as separate and independent groups in order to assess each group's language learning beliefs. Therefore, the two-independent-samples t-test was an appropriate tool for the data analysis. In this two-independent-samples t-test, the null hypothesis that there was no difference in the beliefs across the genders could be rejected if the p-value for t-statistic was less than  $\alpha$  (alpha) 0.05. Otherwise, the null hypothesis that there was no difference in the beliefs across the genders could not be rejected.

### **3.5. Results**

Table 1 reports the results of the data analysis of the beliefs about foreign language aptitude. Statement that some people have better ability for learning a new language (item 2) generated an almost uniform agreement across the genders (Mean=3.40 for both genders, Standard Deviation=1.115 for female and 1.172 for male, t-value=0.013).

Other highly shared beliefs were that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language (item 34) and that it is easier for the children than the adults to learn a new language (item 1), though the female students tended to give a slightly higher support to these propositions than did their male classmates (t-value =1.564 and t-value=1.461, respectively). Interestingly, both the male and female students had an almost similar opinion regarding the statement that women are better language learners than men.

However, there had been a greater diversity of opinions regarding this statement among the male respondents (SD=1.176 for male respondents, and SD=0.857 for female respondents).

Only two statements within the language aptitude theme generated a higher (though not statistically significant) support from the male students, i.e., statement 29 (t-value= - 0.811) and statement 10 (t-value= - 0.283). The male students gave a stronger endorsement to the opinions that people who have talent for mathematics and science were less adept language learners, and that it is easier to acquire a knowledge of an additional language if one is already fluent in some foreign language.

Item	Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language	Female	3.99	0.992	1.461
	Male	3.65	1.231	
2. Some people are born with a special ability which helps them to learn a foreign language	Female	3.40	1.115	0.013
	Male	3.40	1.172	
10. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one	Female	2.91	1.125	-0.283
	Male	2.98	1.165	
15. I have a special ability to learn foreign languages	Female	2.66	0.978	1.111
	Male	2.45	0.846	
22. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages	Female	2.57	0.857	0.80
	Male	2.56	1.176	
29. People who are good at math and science are not good at learning a foreign language	Female	2.10	1.032	-0.811
	Male	2.28	1.086	
32. People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent	Female	3.18	1.029	0.503
	Male	3.08	1.047	
33. Malaysians are good at learning foreign languages	Female	3.36	0.732	1.043
	Male	3.23	0.577	
34. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language	Female	4.58	0.700	1.564
	Male	4.33	0.888	

**Table 1: Foreign Language Aptitude**

In Table 2 results of the data analysis regarding the beliefs about the difficulty of language learning are presented.

As seen in the Table, the female and male students shared the opinion about the length of time required to master the Russian language (item 14; t-value=0.264) and that it is easier to speak than understand the language (item 24, t-value=0.267).

Item	Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others	Female	3.99	1.121	-1.411
	Male	4.28	0.847	
4. The Russian language is: (a) a very difficult language; (b) a difficult language; (c) a language of medium difficulty; (d) an easy language; (e) a very easy language	Female	2.48	0.638	0.636
	Male	2.38	0.774	
5. The Russian language is structured in the same way as English	Female	2.33	0.824	-0.703
	Male	2.45	0.832	
14. If someone spent one hour a day learning the Russian language, how long would it take him/her to become fluent? (a) less than one year; (b) 1-2- years; (c) 3-5 years; (d) 5-10 years; (e) you cannot learn a language in 1 hour a day	Female	2.49	1.341	0.264
	Male	2.43	1.174	
24. It is easier to speak than understand the Russian language	Female	2.96	1.021	0.267
	Male	2.90	1.057	
28. It is easier to read and write Russian than to understand it	Female	3.54	1.105	1.106
	Male	3.30	1.018	

**Table 2: Difficulty of Language Learning**

The highest disparity in the opinions among the students of different genders was generated by the statement about the existence of a hierarchy in foreign languages' difficulty (item 3, t-value=-1.411). The male respondents gave a stronger -- although statistically not significant -- endorsement to this proposition compared to their female classmates. Also, the male students gave a much greater support to the proposition that the Russian language is structured in the same way as the English language (item 5, t-value=-0.703).

Further, the students' motivation towards language study and the expectations they had concerning the outcome of language program were examined (Table 3). The students of both genders held almost a uniform opinion regarding two items in this section, i.e. the purpose of studying the Russian language (item 31, t-value= 0.159) and the belief about the importance of learning the foreign language (item 30, t-value=0.321). Thus, both the female and male students wanted to learn the language in order to have a better knowledge of the native speakers of the target language and thought that the ability to communicate in a foreign language was important.

The only statement in this section to which the male students gave a higher support compared to their female classmates concerned the belief about the outcome of their

language program (item 6,  $t$ -value=-0.623). The male students were somewhat more confident in achieving good proficiency in the Russian language.

Item	Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
6. I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak Russian very well	Female	3.16	0.898	-0.623
	Male	3.28	0.877	
23. If I speak the Russian language very well I will have many opportunities to use it	Female	3.72	0.982	1.282
	Male	3.45	1.131	
27. If I learn to speak the Russian language very well, it will help me get a good job	Female	3.37	0.795	1.289
	Male	3.15	0.975	
30. Malaysians think it is important to speak a foreign language	Female	3.79	0.826	0.321
	Male	3.73	1.132	
31. I would like to learn Russian so that I can get to know the native speakers of the language better	Female	3.70	0.853	0.159
	Male	3.68	0.797	

**Table 3: Motivation and Expectations**

Table 4 presents results of the analysis of the learners’ beliefs about the use of learning and communication strategies. Both the female and male students shared the same opinion about -- and placed a very high value on -- repeating and practicing often (item 17; Mean=4.63 for both genders,  $t$ -value=0.018). Therefore, the proposition that revising the learnt material and practicing one’s language skills was important generated an overwhelming support from the students of both genders.

The statement that received the lowest support in this section as well as in the whole questionnaire was “you shouldn’t say anything in Russian until you say it correctly” (item 9). Interestingly, the male respondents tended to give a higher support to this proposition compared to the female students ( $t$ -value=-1.362). Another statement that attracted a higher support from the male respondents concerned the value of speaking with a native-like pronunciation (item 7,  $t$ -value=-0.518).

Statistically significant difference in the opinions between the students of different genders was generated by the statement regarding utilizing various learning aids, such as the audio tapes, CD-recordings, etc. (item 21  $t$ -value=2.750), which is significant at 0.01 level). The female students placed a far greater importance on the use of such materials than did the male students.

Item	Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
7. It is important to speak the Russian language with an excellent accent	Female	3.24	1.125	-0.518
	Male	3.35	0.975	
9. You shouldn't say anything in Russian until you say it correctly	Female	1.70	0.718	-1.362
	Male	1.93	0.971	
12. If I heard someone speaking the Russian language, I would go up to them so that I can practice speaking the language	Female	3.48	0.990	0.406
	Male	3.40	0.900	
13. It's OK to guess if you don't know a word in the Russian language	Female	3.94	0.886	0.910
	Male	3.78	0.947	
17. It is important to repeat and practice often	Female	4.63	0.517	0.018
	Male	4.63	0.540	
18. I feel shy to speak Russian in front of other people	Female	2.96	1.007	-0.324
	Male	3.03	1.187	
19. If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning it would be hard to get rid of them later on.	Female	2.96	1.236	0.324
	Male	2.88	1.244	
21. It is important to practice with audio materials (cassette tapes, CD recordings, recordings on the Internet)	Female	4.36	0.773	2.750**
	Male	3.90	0.938	

\*\* indicates significance at 0.01 level

**Table 4: Learning and Communication Strategies**

Finally, the questionnaire examined the differences in the female and male students' beliefs about the nature of language learning (see Table 5).

One statement that generated an almost unison agreement among – and was highly supported by -- the respondents of both genders was that “learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects” (item 25; Mean=4.21 for females, and 4.18 for males, t-value=0.213). Interestingly, half of the items in this section of the questionnaire received a stronger endorsement from the male participants.

Thus, though both the female and male students supported the opinions that one needs to know culture of the target language (item 8), felt that it was good to learn a new language in the target language country (item 11), and thought that learning a language mainly involved mastering the grammar skills (item 20), support from the male students for all of these items had been higher compared to the endorsements from their female peers (t-value=-1.021 for item 8, t-value=-1.057 for item 11, t-value=-0.664 for item 20).



Item	Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
8. It is necessary to know Russian culture in order to speak the language well	Female	3.40	0.970	-1.021
	Male	3.60	0.955	
11. It is better to learn a foreign language in the foreign language country	Female	3.76	1.129	-1.057
	Male	4.00	1.132	
16. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words	Female	3.87	0.911	1.050
	Male	3.65	1.189	
20. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules	Female	3.69	1.047	-0.664
	Male	3.83	1.035	
25. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects	Female	4.21	0.789	0.213
	Male	4.18	0.813	
26. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of translating from my mother tongue	Female	2.90	1.002	0.383
	Male	2.98	1.097	

**Table 5: The Nature of Language Learning**

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The current study was carried out among the students learning a foreign (Russian) language at a Malaysian university. As a result of growing up in a multi-cultural and multi-lingual society, such as Malaysia, all the participants in this research spoke several languages and dialects and had an extensive language learning experience. All of these factors have made the participants in this study an especially interesting target group for an inquiry into language learning beliefs. This study aimed to examine whether there existed differences in language learning beliefs among the students of different genders, and whether these differences were considerable.

Horwitz (1999, p.557) maintained that knowing students' language learning beliefs was important for "planning appropriate language instruction". Therefore, a study on the similarities and differences in learners' beliefs from the gender perspective may offer some additional insight as to how to hammer out an optimal for a particular cohort of learners classroom procedure. It also could help the language instructor to assess whether some special measures or teaching techniques would be required to enhance the students' involvement in the teaching/learning process.

The results of the current study lend support to those previous inquiries where the gender-related differences in the students' attitudes towards language study had not been prominent (Shaaban and Ghaith, 2003). The only statistically significant difference in the male and female students' beliefs detected in this inquiry concerned the value and

importance of the audio materials and the CD-recordings as support aids in the process of language study. The female students assigned a much greater importance to using these materials.

The majority of the questionnaire items (23 out of 34 statements) received a higher support from the female participants. However, the female students did not exhibit a definitely more positive attitude towards learning the foreign language than did their male peers. Both genders placed a great importance on learning a foreign language and recognized its practical value.

Among the statements that received a stronger endorsement from the male respondents were:

Item 3: Some language are easier to learn than others (t-value=-1.411)

Item 9: You shouldn't say anything in Russian until you say it correctly (t-value=-1.362)

Item 11: It is better to learn a foreign language in the foreign language country (t-value=-1.057)

Item 8: It is necessary to know Russian culture in order to speak the language well (t-value=-1.021)

Item 32: People who are good at mathematics and science are not good at learning a foreign language (t-value=-0.811)

Item 5: The Russian language is structured in the same way as English (t-value=-0.703)

Item 20: Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules (t-value=-0.664)

Item 6: I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak Russian very well (t-value=-0.623)

Item 7: It is important to speak the Russian language with an excellent accent (t-value=-0.518)

Item 18: I feel shy to speak Russian in front of other people (t-value=-0.324)

Item 1: It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one (t-value=-0.283)

Based on these results, the male students emerged as slightly less confident language learners compared to their female peers. They placed a higher value to having a good accent (item 7) and speaking correctly (item 9), reported being more shy to speak Russian in front of others (item 18) and agreed that people who are good at science subjects are less adept language learners (item 29). However, these differences were not statistically significant.

Quite remarkably, notwithstanding the presence of some beliefs that could inhibit language learning, the male respondents were quite confident in a successful outcome of their language study, and more of the male students were convinced that ultimately they would learn to speak Russian very well (item 6) compared to the female students.

Conclusion based on the findings of the current study is quite unambiguous. The results revealed that gender-related differences in beliefs about language learning had been minimal among this particular cohort of learners. This finding provided an additional support to a notion that differences in beliefs about and attitudes towards language

learning can be viewed as culturally-determined and are shaped by the students’ previous learning experiences (see Politzer, 1983) rather than gender-related. All the participants in the present study had an extensive language learning experience in both formal (*eg.* at school) and informal (*eg.* at home) settings and spoke several language and/or dialects. Therefore, the finding that beliefs about language learning among this group of students were strikingly uniform in several instances may reflect a fact that all the participants grew up in a multi-cultural and multi-lingual society and have formed open, positive and practical attitudes towards language learning.

Implications of the current research findings for language pedagogy are that the language educators need to be aware – but do not overestimate – the learners’ differences, which may or may not exist, or be prominent, in different educational setting. Language instructors need to strive to promote an inclusive classroom atmosphere for all the learners regardless of the gender, and prepare activities and materials that would be interesting and thought-provoking for both the female and male students.

It is often a case at universities that students from various schools and faculties attend the same language class. Language instructors could try to diversify teaching materials to address both the arts and science/technology topics, since the latter are often lacking in the language textbooks. Every teacher wishes to have enthusiastic and keen students in the classroom. To promote a thriving and stimulating language learning environment a language instructor needs to know and understand his or her audience and the beliefs the students hold about language learning.

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