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**Gender Differences and L2 Writing**

**Abdul Saeed, Mohammad Ramazan, Ph.D., Aijaz Ahmed Gujjar, and  
Javed Iqbal, Ph.D.**

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**Abstract**

Different researchers tried to find out the proficiency difference in Second Language Learning between male and female gender. Most of these researchers found women as better language learners than their counterparts. The present study was also an attempt to investigate the idea of gender difference in learning Second Language through a composition test. Errors of only Past Indefinite tense were analysed. The subjects of the study were the students of Graduation level at Bahawalpur City, Pakistan. Quantitative research paradigm was followed by the researcher for the present study. The data were collected through composition test based on free writing. Results revealed that the female students committed less errors of L2 writing as compared to male students. Thus, females can be said better language learners than males.

**Key words:** Gender, Composition, Past tense.

**1.1 Introduction**

Learning Second Language (L2) is deemed to be a quite different phenomenon from Mother Tongue (L1) acquisition. Mistakes and errors, no doubts, are committed while learning both L1 and L2. Native speakers of any language either children or adults make errors in their day-to-day use of language. But, it is probably true to say that these errors

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are not generally treated as errors in the same sense as those produced by L2 learners.

Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing are the four steps that have to be followed in the process of learning any language. Listening and Speaking are generally considered as primary skills while Reading and Writing are deemed to be secondary. While speaking, other sources also help in communicating any message such as postures, gestures, tone etc. but in written medium all the information has to be conveyed without any aid other than language itself.

The nature of L1 writing is quite different from L2 writing. In L1 writing the learner can perform with least hesitation and with a few possibilities of errors and mistakes but in L2 writing the case is different. L2 learners of English as a Second Language are reluctant to write. In fact, the learners of ESL are faced with many social and cognitive challenges while writing. Second language proficiency in L2 writing is usually defined as control over the mechanical elements and grammatical aspects of Target Language (TL).

There are many other things and differences between L1 and L2 writing ranging from mechanical knowledge of writing to sociolinguistic knowledge of writing.

Silva (1993), in a review of differences between First and Second Language writing writes that Second and Foreign language writing tends to be more constrained, difficult and less effective than writing in a first language.

The ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill; it is usually learned and culturally transmitted as a set of principles in formal instructional settings or other environment. Students writing in a Second Language generally produce facts that contain varying degrees of grammatical and rhetorical errors. In fact, depending on proficiency level, the more content-rich and creative the text, the greater the possibility there is for errors at the morpho-syntactic level. These kinds of errors are common among L2 writers who have a lot of ideas, but not enough language to express what they want to say in a comprehensible way.

English Language has become a lingua franca. It is being used as a Second Language in Pakistan. It is being taught in Pakistan from Primary level to up to Graduate level and even it is considered compulsory in higher studies. A student who is proficient in English speaking and writing is deemed to be intelligent and given more importance. But, despite teaching of English from Primary to up till Graduate level, it is observed that students commit same sort of errors even at higher level, which they commit at lower level.

Culture plays a very vital role in learning Second Language. Gardner (1985), in the Socio-educational Model of L2 learning, states that the social and cultural milieu in which learners grow up determine the attitude and motivational orientation that learners hold towards the target language. In Pakistani society, to a great extent, men and women enjoy different status. They have different opportunities for learning that affect their

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process of learning Second Language.

## 1.2 Error and Mistake

Norrish (1983: 07) made a clear distinction between error and mistake. He stated errors as '*a systematic deviation when a learner has not learnt something and consistently gets it wrong.*' He, however, defined mistakes as "*inconsistent deviation*". For example, if a learner has not yet been taught a certain correct form and he uses one form sometimes and another at other times quite inconsistently, the inconsistent deviation is called mistake. Brown (2000:217) defined mistake as, "A mistake refers to a performance error that is either a random guess or a 'slip' in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly." Corder (1967), however, argues that Error Analysis (EA) should be restricted to the study of errors only i.e. mistakes should not be studied in error analysis.

## 1.3 Language and Gender

To draw a demarcation between gender and sex is very necessary before we further explore the research studies in context of language and gender. Sex is a biological phenomenon which is identified according to sexuality as one being male or female. On the other hand Gender is the social construction of the characteristics of men and women and these are the societies which divide genders as being masculine and feminine. Sex is natural i.e. genetic while gender is cultural. Colebrook (1998) differentiates gender with sex by quoting Oakley:

'Sex' is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. 'Gender', however, is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into 'masculine' and 'feminine'. (p. 09)

It is believed that being the different gender, the language of male and female is different. There are, in reality, far more similarities in language learning and its use than differences in males and females. However, some of the differences have been noted by the different researchers. According to Jespersen (1922), men are fond of hypo taxis and women are fond of parataxis by which he meant that women prefer to string clauses together ( like a set of pearls) while he meant that men employ complex sentences ( like a set of Chinese boxes, one within another).

Men are also said to use more straightforward form of imperatives than the women do. Sachs (1987) did his study on two-to-five- year old children (average age four) in which he noticed that girls showed an obvious tendency to soften their imperatives while boys' imperatives were very straightforward. He further stated that 25% of boys' commands were straightforward imperatives (*Bring him to the hospital*) and 11% were prohibitions (*Don't touch it*), while for girls the results were 10% and 2% respectively. On the other

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hand, girls used more joint directives (*Now we'll cover him up*), which were 15% as compared to the boys' 3%. In another study held by Shuy (1967), on American English speakers of Detroit, it was found that male used multiple negations (*Ain't nobody going nowhere no ways*) 30% more often than females (Shuy *et. al.* 1967).

Some of the evidences have been found which show gender difference in language acquisition process. Gleason (1987: 198) noted down, "At the age of four, boys are imitating male forms; girls are imitating female patterns, a process which may begin as early as the age of eighteen months." Anderson (1977) in study at nursery school age and beyond (three to seven), children portray fathers' speech as straightforward, unqualified and forceful and mothers' speech as talkative, polite, qualified and higher pitched.

Lakoff (1975), radically, focused on gender difference to syntax, semantics, and style. He suggested that women language is closer to standard form. Griffith (1992) differentiated 'males' being Field Independence to perform well in formal setting while 'females' being Field Dependent to perform well in informal setting. Tannen (1990) described the difference between male and female style of speech. He stated that males always try to have upper hand and try to be dominant while females are found to be supportive and try to create an intimacy in their speech.

Ghani (2007), taking the Lakoff's linguistic features, held a study on Pakistani women. She studied 56 subjects' 'Hedging Devices' and finally supported Lakoff's classification of the features of women speech and concluded that Pakistani women's speech is also very close to standard language and that women are very conscious of their speech. Haroon & Sani (2009) also found same findings in their research on 9-11 year old children learning their second and third language. In the findings girls outperformed boys in language learning and committed fewer errors than boys.

The present study is also an attempt to investigate the proficiency level of male and female students learning English as their Second Language in Pakistan.

## **2. Methodology**

The data were collected from both male and female students studying at Graduation in the different colleges of Bahawalpur City. Random sampling technique was used in which each participant had equal chance to be a part of the study.

The subjects were assigned a composition test based on free writing. In the present study the researcher intended to analyse the errors of only Past Indefinite tense made by both male and female students. So, for this, a topic was required which could provide the subjects ample material for writing any past incident. So, an essay "A Wedding Ceremony" was assigned to the students in an equal time of 50 minutes.

Total number of students who were selected randomly for the test was 450 consisting of

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equal number of male and female students i.e., 225 each. Out of this amount, 23 sample tests were excluded from the main sample because they wrote less than 200 words or more than 250 words. Thus, finally 427 students' samples were selected for main data analysis

So, from remaining 427 samples, 160 samples were selected from both male and female students i.e. 80 from each. Systematic Random Sampling technique was followed in which the sampling interval was kept as 2. Thus, every third test was selected for final data analysis.

### 3. Findings

**Table 1: Common Error of (MV and H.V) of Past Indefinite Tense**

C<sub>1</sub>= Millet College Bwp C<sub>2</sub>Allama Iqbal College Bwp C<sub>3</sub> Soft Vision College Bwp C<sub>4</sub>AIPS College Bwp

Colleges	<b>Main Verb</b>		<b>Helping Verb</b>		Total Errors	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
C <sub>1</sub>	112	76	8	2	120	78
C <sub>2</sub>	44	48	4	2	48	50
C <sub>3</sub>	172	88	2	2	174	90
C <sub>4</sub>	104	112	2	3	106	115

As in the table # 1 data reveal a significant quantity of errors in the use of Past Indefinite Tense both by male and female students. The male students of C1 College committed 112 errors in the use of Main Verb (MV) and 08 errors in the use of Helping Verb(HV) and female students of the same College committed 76 errors in the use of MV while only 02 errors in the use of HV. Similarly, the male students of C2 College committed 44 MV and 04 HV errors while female students committed 44 MV and 02 HV errors respectively. The male students of C3 did 172 MV and 02 HV errors and female students 88MV and 02 HV errors. Finally, the male students of C4 College committed 104 MV and 02 HV errors while female students committed 112 MV and 03 HV errors.

The male students of C1 College thus committed total 120 errors while the female students 78 errors and the male students of C2 College 48 and female students 50 errors. The male students of C3 College did 174 errors which are quite large in quantity as compare to female students of the same college who did 90 errors. The male students of C4 College committed total 106 errors while female students committed 115 errors.

On the whole, the male students of all colleges committed more errors as compare to female students. Male students committed total 432 MV errors while female students 324 MV errors. Male students committed 16 HV errors and female students 09 HV errors. Consequently, male did 448 errors and female 333 errors.

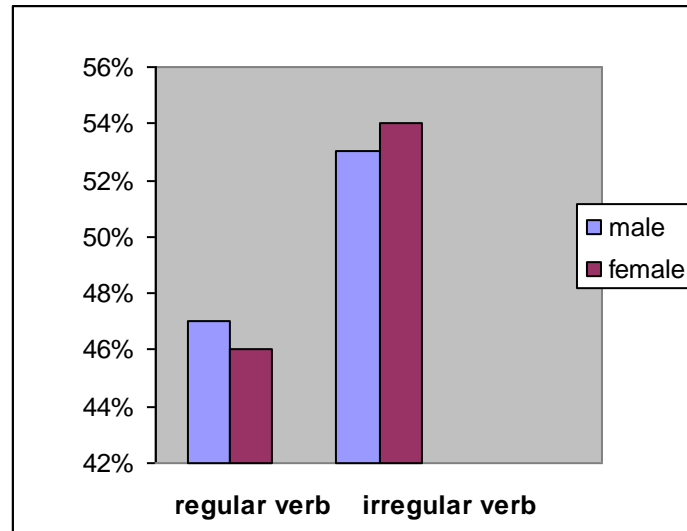
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### 3.1 Regular vs. Irregular verbs

**Graph 1: Error percentage of Regular and Irregular verb form**



The results in the graph # 1 show that the students of both gender committed more errors in the use of irregular verb form as compared to regular verb form. The difference between these two errors is quite significant. The male students committed 47% errors in the use of regular verb forms and 53% errors in the use of irregular verb forms. On the other hand female students committed 46% errors in the use of regular verb forms while 54% errors in the use of irregular verb forms. The result shows that both male and female students feel difficulty in the use of irregular verb forms as compare to regular verb forms.

### 3.2 Types of Errors

After the analysis some of the error types were found that are described here.

- 1 Overgeneralizations of the regular suffix – ed ( Gen-ed):
  - 1) wear- □ weared
  - 2) eat - □ eated
- 2 Improper do- insertion: find
  - 1) □ did like meal
  - 2) □ did remember the wedding party
- 3 Did + past tense insertion:
  - 1) □ did praised the bride

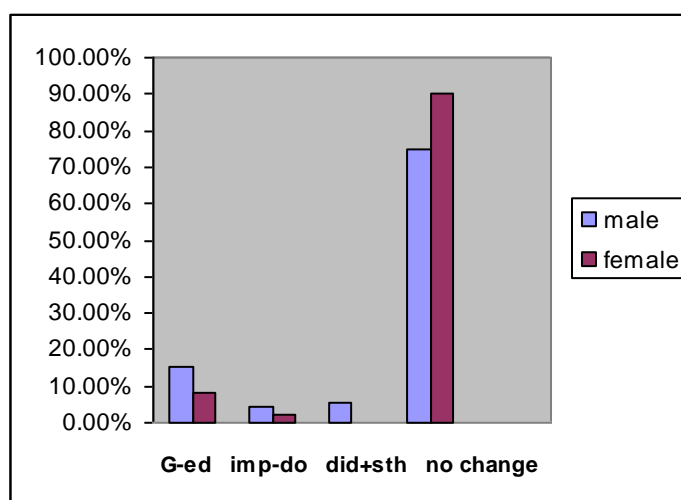
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- 2) □did served the meal
- 4 No change on the verb:
- 1) Last year I □attend a wedding party of my cousin.
  - 2) Everybody □enjoy the party.

**Graph 2: Error percentage of Error Types**



Errors in graph # 02 show the high percentage of those errors in which they did not change the tense. Students used present form where past form should have been used. In male students it is 70% while in female students this percentage is very high and moves up to 90%. Next are those errors in which students overgeneralised regular *-ed* form. For instance, *eat-eated*. The percentage of these errors is about 15% in male while 08% in female students. Few of the students inserted- *do* improperly i.e. they used *did* where only regular past form was enough to be used. These kinds of errors are very low in both male and female students. Male committed 4% errors and female only 2%. Last but not least, some of the male students used *did+ past tense form* where only past form should have been used.

#### 4. Suggestions

1. While writing in TL, students first think in their L1 and then translate it into L2. It may affect their writing. So, students should be instructed again and again to think directly in their TL. In this way L1 will intervene the least in their writing tasks.
2. Writing competitions should be arranged in classrooms on regular basis. Books pertaining to target language can be given to the successful students as a token of love. It will stimulate students to get proficiency in their TL.

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3. Though the students of both gender made errors in the use of regular as well as irregular verbs but they made more errors in the use of irregular verb forms. So, more focus should be given to the right use of irregular verb forms.

4. As the results show that the learners of both genders are not very good at using Past tense. So, they should give more and more opportunities to write in past tense. On the other hand, teachers should also make the students aware of their errors in a very positive and encouraging way. Teacher should not discourage them anyway. The language is difficult enough; let us not make it more difficult.

## 5. Conclusion

The present research further supported the idea of women being better language learners than men. Moreover, research also gave an insight that both students need special focus about the use of Past tense. It also made clear that the students face more difficulty in the use of irregular verb forms. So, if these areas are focused seriously, we hope that students will get language proficiency with ease.

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