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The Call Triangle: student, teacher and institution

Application of Gender Difference and Topic Preference to Promote Students' Motivation for Online EFL Learning

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is to apply the analysis of gender difference and topic preference to enhance and motivate online EFL learning shown by Taiwanese students enrolled in Freshman English Aural Training courses for English majors in a university in central Taiwan.

Online learning for EFL students has been a worldwide trend. Hundreds of websites are accessible for EFL students to learn English linguistically and culturally. Many websites are free for users to learn autonomously; however, in order for EFL students to learn English effectively, it is essential for EFL teachers to create a pedagogical design to increase students' motivation to learn.

Gender difference has been a controversial issue. Scientists have found that the brain structure of men and women are different (Rogers, 1999, Sax, 2005). While this is true, the influence of culture on EFL students' preference for different topics to learn online cannot be underestimated.

This paper will present the preferences shown by both male and female Aural Training students' choices toward Voice of America (<http://www.voanews.com/learningenglish/home/>) online listening articles in the following topics: Science, Technology, Education, Entertainment and Economy. The analysis of the data shows that gender difference in choosing topics online for EFL learning is applicable to EFL pedagogical design and thus suggests that EFL teachers take these two factors in consideration when planning materials for the male and female students in their EFL classes.

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Keywords: student motivation; gender difference; topic preference; English as a foreign language

1. Introduction

English Aural Training for English majors is a two-semester required course for the first-year English majors. There is a trend for EFL teachers and students to use online websites for English Aural instruction and learning, to name a few: voanews.com, cnn.com, npr.org, bbc.co.uk, guardian.co.uk and ted.com. There are articles with themes for teachers to use in class and for students to select for autonomous learning after class.

In order to provide guidance for students to learn effectively, teachers need to do research about what materials are most suitable and favorable for students to use. For freshmen, VOA (Voice of America) is a good starter because it covers a wide range of topics and issues: American idioms, life, history, tradition, values and cultures, health and education, science and technology, economy, entertainment and global issues. Since it is designed for EFL listeners in simple English with limited vocabulary, the speed of the

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article reading is slower than authentic ones; however, students could adjust the speed on the computer according to their level of listening proficiency. Besides, some new terms and concepts, especially from science and technology articles, could still be of great value for students of higher proficiency level.

Although students were all English majors, their levels of listening proficiency varied: In every class, a couple of students had had the experience of living in an English-speaking country for a few years; some had studied in short-term English programs abroad; others, still struggle to understand the main idea of the articles. In addition, gender difference is another factor for consideration about what articles to choose for instruction from online listening resources. Students' social and cultural background should also be taken into consideration for effective EFL teaching. Therefore, how to promote the motivation for students of different background to learn is a challenging task. Some VOA articles are very easy to understand; others like science and technology, even for advanced students, are pretty new to them. As teachers, selecting articles of different topics to arouse the interest of the whole class to be engaged in EFL learning is a must to successfully motivate students of different levels and gender.

2. Literature review

In *Sexing the Brain*, Rogers mentioned that new technology enables neuroscientists to explore our brain, discover how our brain thinks and implements functions. (Rogers, 1999:20).

However, Leeuwen has pointed out the operation of men's and women's brain is integrative. For example, men have better spatial ability, but women have better strategies dealing with space. She emphasized in *Gender and Grace*, even though men and women are different in genes, hormones and brain structure, we can't impose stereotypical behaviors on both sexes or take the physical differences both men and women are born with to be the excuses for making mistakes. We need to take the factor of nurture after we are born into consideration. (Leeuwen, 1990:110-111).

Influenced by Western feminisms and women's liberation movements, the Chinese tradition of men as the dominating sex in the society has been shaken in Taiwan. Sex-equality has become one of the focal points for the mainstream education. The Gender-equality Education Committee was founded in March, 1997 to develop an educational environment without sex discrimination (Xie, 2002:357). However, students in Taiwan are still much affected by traditional gender role attitudes imposed by their parents and the society. They have their sex identity very early in the family; for example, boys are named with the meaning of power, wealth, excellence, pride and achievement, while girls with that of tenderness, beauty, obedience, diminution and virtues. Boys are taught at home to be tough, never shed tears, glorify ancestors and family and meet their expectations. Girls are asked to be well-groomed, gentle, share household chores and take care of their younger brothers and sisters (Xie, 2002:358). In general, the gender role attitude extends from the family to the society, so from an early age at home to the college period at school, most of the students in Taiwan have a very basic and conventional stereotypical sex identity and present different learning approaches in the process of their education. Educators are encouraged to take both factors of gender and cultural differences into consideration for curricular planning and instruction.

As many scholars pointed out, among many factors for effective EFL learning, motivation is probably one of the fundamental determinants of Individuals' action. Williams & Burden (1997) defines it as

Motivation may be construed as a state of cognitive and emotional arousal, which leads to conscious decision to act, and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal (or goals) (Williams & Burden, 1997:120).

Gardener defines L2 motivation as "the extent to which an individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity" (Gardener, 1985:10). In "Exploring the Role of Attitude, Motivation and Gender in EFL Learning" Sugimoto, Rahimpour and Yaghoubi-Notash stated: "By probing into the male and female specific motivational patterns, language instruction can be geared up to learners' interests. In this way, language learning content can serve to prepare the learners for more autonomous kind of learning a foreign language." (Sugimoto, Rahimpour & Yaghoubi-Notash, 2008:13).

The environment for EFL learners has changed drastically in a decade. With the popularity of social networking like Facebook (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook>), both male and female students have more chances to make international friends online by using English. Most of college EFL learners are active users of Facebook and by joining common-interest user groups online, gender difference might become a positive thing for them to learn from one another and to improve their motivation for learning English.

3. Method

The subjects of this research were 180 English Aural Training students from three classes. Each class was divided into 8 groups with about 7-8 students in each group. Every student had a cubicle with a computer and headsets. Internet was accessible for instruction and learning in class. Students were required to listen to texts of different topics from textbooks, courseware and websites in class. They needed to listen to after-class online listening materials and take quizzes every week for reinforcement of their listening comprehension. The quizzes included dictation, main idea of the listening texts and their reflection on the content. Sometimes students gained extra credit if they could exchange their thoughts from the listening articles with their group partners in class. Selected articles from Voice of America online were assigned for everyone to listen to after class. Students of higher-level listening proficiency were encouraged to do more advanced listening practice of their own choice online. They were also welcome to share with the whole class anything they found interesting and inspiring.

It is a common sight in college here in Taiwan to see more female students and fewer male students in The English Department. There were 138 female subjects and only 42 male subjects. Male students were the minority group, and they chose to be in the same group for grouping; they consisted of two groups out of eight in each class, and the two groups usually stayed very close to each other in the classroom.

There were more than ten listening articles for them to listen to online for one semester of 18 weeks. At the end of the semester, on a questionnaire they chose their favorite online listening article out of the five articles they had listened to, each with a distinctive theme. For the fall semester, 2010, on the questionnaire, on which this research is based, the five online articles from Special English, voanews.com are categorized as follows:

1. Science
"Babies and Intelligence: The Latest Findings" (29 November 2010)
2. Technology
"Mobile Phones May Soon Test for STIs and Blood Pressure" (05 December 2010)
3. Education
"Lessons From Shanghai's Top Scores on International Test" (15 December 2010)
4. Entertainment
"The King's Speech, Black Swan and More: At the Movies This Holiday Season" (12 December 2011)
5. Economy
"Online Dictionary says Austerity Tops 2010 Words" (23 December 2010)

As a follow-up to the Entertainment article, those who had a preference for this had to point out which movie of the five mentioned in the article: *The King's Speech*, *Black Swan*, *The Next Three Days*, *127 Hours* and *Morning Glory* they would love to see most. The plots of the five interesting films were summarized in the article as below:

1. *The King Speech* tells the true story of how Britain's King George the Sixth overcame a speech difficulty to give hope to his country during World War Two.
2. *Black Swan* is a psychological thriller about the world of ballet called "Black Swan." She (Natalie Portman) must dance two roles—the innocent White Swan and the evil Black Swan.
3. *The Next Three Days* is a crime drama. It tells the story of a schoolteacher who creates a plan to break his wife out of prison.
4. *127 Hours* is the true story of mountain climber Aron Ralston's near-death experience. His right arm was crushed between the rock and canyon wall Aron Ralston could not move. He knew his chances of survival were low because he had not told anyone where he was hiking.
5. *Morning Glory* shows the daily operation of a morning television news program. Becky Fuller, a young, energetic television producer, tries to improve the lowest-rated morning program on television and increase the number of viewers. The movie makes fun of the real-life battle between news and entertainment that takes place each day on American morning television.

4. Results

Statistics from the topic preference questionnaire on VOA articles shows that both male and female students liked the entertainment article, "The King's Speech, Black Swan and More: At the Movies This

Holiday Season” with a very high percentage. From the figures and the percentage charts in appendices, it is quite interesting for us to see that male students showed higher interest in other four topics: science, technology, education and economy than female students did. As for their movie preferences, the film with the highest percentage for male students is *The King’s Speech*; for female students, *Black Swan*. The film with the second highest percentage for male students is *127 Hours*; for female students, *The Next Three Days*. The raw data can be seen below.

Male Students (total number: 42)

1. Science Topic (chosen by 4 students)
“Babies and Intelligence: The Latest Findings”
2. Technology Topic (chosen by 10 students)
“Mobile Phones May Soon Test for STIs and Blood Pressure”
3. Education Topic (chosen by 7 students)
“Lessons From Shanghai’s Top Scores on International Test”
4. Entertainment Topic (chosen by 14 students)
“The King’s Speech, Black Swan and More: At the Movies This Holiday Season”
5. Economy Topic (chosen by 7 students)
“Online Dictionary says Austerity Tops 2010 Words”

Female Students (total number: 138)

1. Science Topic (chosen by 10 students)
“Babies and Intelligence: The Latest Findings”
2. Technology Topic (chosen by 24 students)
“Mobile Phones May Soon Test for STIs and Blood Pressure”
3. Education Topic (chosen by 20 students)
“Lessons From Shanghai’s Top Scores on International Test”
4. Entertainment Topic (chosen by 74 students)
“The King’s Speech, Black Swan and More: At the Movies This Holiday Season”
5. Economy Topic (chosen by 10 students)
“Online Dictionary says Austerity Tops 2010 Words”

The results of the follow-up questionnaire on the Entertainment article from VOA, which introduced five movies for Christmas holiday season 2010, are listed below:

1. *The King’s Speech* (male: 7 out of 14 total; female: 15 out of 74 total)
2. *Black Swan* (male: 2 out of 14 total; female: 32 out of 74 total)
3. *The Next Three Days* (male: 1 out of 14 total; female: 18 out of 74 total)
4. *127 Hours* (male: 3 out of 14 total; female: 6 out of 74 total)
5. *Morning Glory* (1 out of 14 total; female: 3 out of 74 total)

5. Conclusion and implications

Perhaps one major reason could account for why both male and female students chose the entertainment article as their most favorite topic to listen to online after class: They considered English learning should be an activity for pleasure; in other words, they thought they would learn it better when they enjoyed learning it. Most of the movies have exciting plots whether they are of history, reality or drama—all contribute to relate the students to life situations and thus fascinate and inspire them and add experiences to their life linguistically, culturally and mentally.

For EFL pedagogical design, films for entertainment is a powerful tool to improve students’ motivation to learn. If students enjoy watching movies in English, they would love to learn more about English. We could apply the Flow theory developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihaly to explain why most of the EFL students are highly motivated to learn English by watching the movies. Csikszentmihaly describes flow as “the holistic experience that people feel when they act with total involvement” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975:36). People enter a flow state when they are fully absorbed in activity during which they lose their sense of time and have feelings of great satisfaction. According to Chan & Ahern (1999: 159) Flow argues that the structure of activity in the context of challenge, goal, feedback, concentration and control has major influences on intrinsic motivation. For EFL teaching, how to create instructional design models that favor intrinsic motivation becomes an important task.

Nowadays gender role stereotypes are not as rigid as in the past. Sometimes we walk down on the street we might see a couple of fashionably dressed men with highlights in their hair; other times, we see women having men's wear and watching soccer games.

However, gender differences still exist in terms of the operation of brain and emotion. Women tend to be more empathizing, understanding while men are interested more in understanding systems and how things work and finding solutions. In EFL classroom, teachers should encourage male and female students to be mingled in the same group, so they could learn from one another and eventually be integrated to have intrinsic motivation to learn the target language.

In conclusion, online websites with lots of update, authentic, interactive programs are very beneficial to EFL learners if their teachers have a pedagogical design with gender and topic in mind. Many EFL students in junior and senior high schools in Taiwan are tired of textbook English used in class for endless exams and some of them are under stress and have negative attitude in English learning. Online EFL resources offer them an opportunity to learn intrinsically with pleasure and eventually would motivate them to have life-long autonomous learning.

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Figure 1 : Topic Preferences for VOA Articles

Topic	Male	Female	Male in %	Female in %
1.Science	4	10	9.52%	7.25%
2.Technology	10	24	23.81%	17.39%
3.Education	7	20	16.67%	14.49%
4.Entertainment	14	74	33.33%	53.62%
5.Economy	7	10	16.67%	7.25%

Male=42

Female=138

Figure 2 : Movie Preferences for VOA Articles

Movie	Male	Female	Male in %	Female in %
1. <i>The King's Speech</i>	7	15	50.00%	20.27%
2. <i>Black Swan</i>	2	32	14.29%	43.24%
3. <i>The Next Three Days</i>	1	18	7.14%	24.32%
4. <i>127 Hours</i>	3	6	21.43%	8.11%
5. <i>MorningGlory</i>	1	3	7.14%	4.05%

Male=14

Female=74

Chart 1 : Topic Preferences for VOA Articles

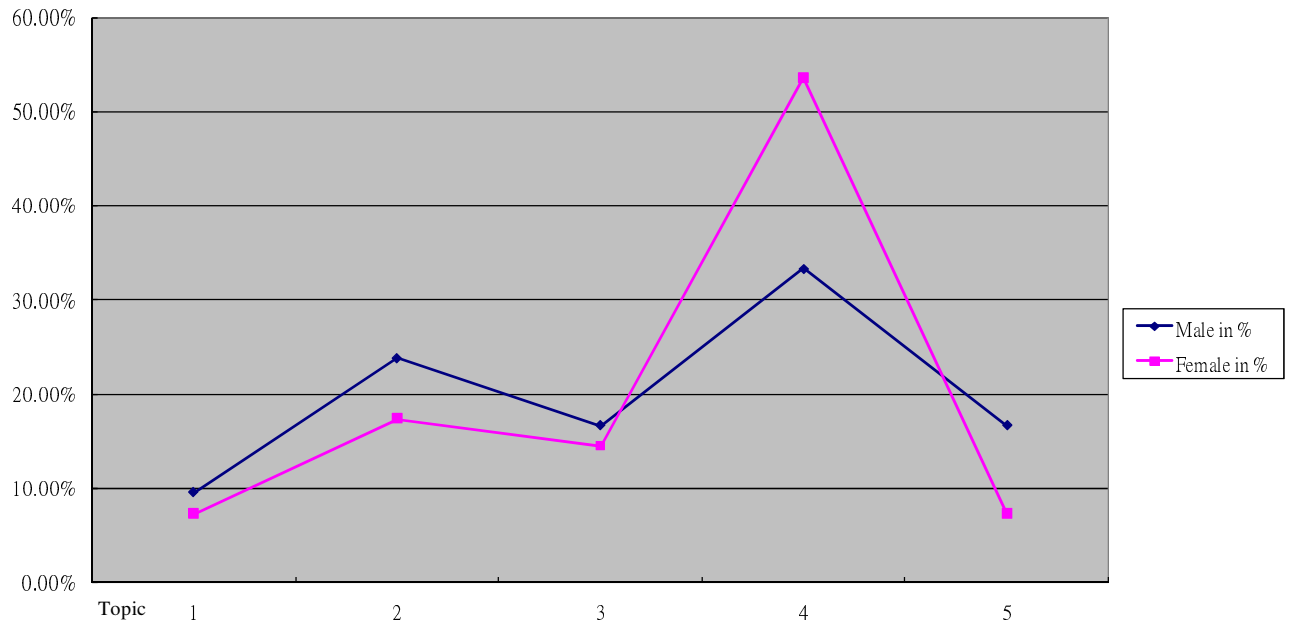


Chart 2 : Movie Preferences for VOA Articles

