Adapting English Teaching to Engage Malaysian Male Learners

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Abstract

While many female students are diligent in their studies, many male students do not seem to engage with the learning process. This situation cannot be blamed on the maleness of the students, we should find more effective ways to teach these students. There has been a substantial amount of research on male learning preferences and on the global phenomenon of female students outperforming male students. Drawing from this research we suggest practical approaches to teaching English to Malaysian male students that are likely to lead to better results.

Keywords: . English teaching; Malaysian male learners; motivation.

Introduction

The phenomenon of female students doing better than male students in academic studies seems to be common in many countries in varying degrees, although there is some dispute about how significant this gap is. People are asking where the men have gone in universities and there is a lot of discussion on this gender gap. The causes are also complex, they vary country by country and are debated.

In Malaysia, government statistics from 2011 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012) show that in Tertiary education in general males account for just 39.5% of the number of students, the imbalance in certain sectors of Tertiary education such as universities could be greater.

Teachers could be inclined to think that male students are simply not as good as female students when it comes to academic study and they really should start behaving more like the female students if they want to get on in life. However, we would have to ask whether male learners have alternative ways to learn that are equally effective given the right environment. This would imply that teachers need to teach male learners differently.

With many male students not doing so well academically many teachers would want to find ways to help them improve. This paper assumes that there must be some ways to teach male learners that are more effective than other ways. We also focus on the field of English language learning and the context of Malaysia.

How can we more effectively teach these male learners? To answer this question this paper will first take a more general look at what is known about the differences between male and females regarding learning through the perspective of educational neuroscience before proceeding to educational psychology, and sociolinguistics. We will then move on to look at studies which have already been carried out on how to engage male learners in language learning. Finally, we will make some practical suggestions for how to adapt language classes to more effectively engage male Malaysian language learners.

Educational Neuroscience: Differences of Male and Female Learners?

Educational Neuroscience is an emerging trans-disciplinary field that brings together education, learning, teaching, the brain structure and policy (Petito & Dunbar, 2004). While neuroscience is a subset of biology that studies the brain functioning at cellular level (Aranda 2013), educational neuroscience brings interaction of psychology, neuroscience and education to shape educational practice and theory (Aranda 2013).

Although OECD 2007 found no evidence on the differences between male and female learning process at neural level, this has been contradicted by studies such as Ingalhalikar M, Smith A, Parker D, et al. 2014. Functional MRI study by Ingalhalikar M, Smith A, Parker D, et al. 2014 discovered that inter-hemispheric connectivity was much stronger in women's and girls' brains. Intra-hemispheric connectivity on the other hand, was much stronger in the brains of men and boys. These study demonstrated that while "male brains are structured to facilitate connectivity between perception and coordinated

action", "female brains are designed to facilitate communication between analytical and intuitive processing modes". The important point to be noted here is: compared to female, male samples seems to perform better in spatial memory task and have better sensory motor speed.

The result might also shed some clue on better academic performance of female students, that seems to have better attention, stronger word and face memory and stronger social cognition (Ingalhalikar M, Smith A, Parker D, 2014). The usefulness of memorisation as a SLA tool has also been supported by Tinkham 1989. In fact, in Malaysian education system, memorisation plays a significant role, which in a way might also be giving a greater advantage to female students and therefore creating a bigger performance gap between male and female students.

It is therefore believed that, should L2 teaching methods are changed to practical/real life application (where memorisation is not the main ingredient to signify better performance and the topics are of high interest), male students are predicted to perform equaly if not better than the female students. This in fact has been shown by William 2002.

Educational Psychology

In understanding different gender learning preferences, the discussion shall continue in the perspective of educational psychology. Educational psychology is a subset of psychology branch that focuses on scientific study of human learning. It incorporates

human development, individual differences, measurement, learning, and motivation and is both a data-driven and a theory-driven discipline Glover and Ronning (1987, p. 14).

It shall be later seen, that male and female preferences are consistent at both neural and psychological level. Earlier studies such as Politzer 1983 have also demonstrated the tendency of male learners to use different approaches in learning compared to female learners.

Consistent with learning preference at neural level, Severiens & Dam1994 demonstrated that women tend to use memorisation which is "more surface or reproducing approach of learning" compared to "man that prefer deep approach to learning." Study by Ehrman and Oxford 1988 demonstrated that females tend to use social learning strategies or techniques that use at least one more person. The technique is believed to be beneficial as it exposes the learner to the target language, by increasing the amount of interaction with language users. This might also increase the learner's motivation that is essential in successful SLA process.

Sociolinguistics Perspective

The discussion continues by taking into account the sociolingusitic perspective. Sociolinguistics studies language in relation to society (Hudson 2001 p.1). It touches on the effect of "cultural norms, expectations, and context, on the way language is used, and the effects of language use on society" (Wikipedia).

Studies into learning preferences comparing male and female learners have been far from conclusive. There have been many studies and they have often had conflicting and

even opposite results. Looking at findings for Malaysian students studies such as Yacizi (2005) have shown that Asian male students tend to use individualistic approach in learning while female students are more associated with collective learning style. This seems to be consistent with earlier discussion that due to lack of interaction, female students tend to perform better compared to male students. However, unlike the studies that viewed male students as individualistic, a study by Jedin & Saad 2006 showed that Malaysian male students are collectivist while female students tend to learn collaboratively within their circle of friends. In fact, the study were inclined to view the results more contrarily. Although both of the genders seems to demonstrate collective learning style, female students were found to be concerned with their individual personal interest.

A Malaysian study by Mustafa, Chiew and Rinong, 2009 to certain extent seems to demonstrate a similar view. The result of the study pointed that both male and female students preferred learning in groups but with difference in the perceptual learning styles preferences (PSLP). While male students do not have any major PSLP, female students showed greater preference on auditory, group, and kinaesthetic as their perceptual learning styles (Mustafa, Chiew and Rinong 2009).

This seems to leave the search for differences in some confusion. However a comprehensive review of studies on learning preferences by Vaseghi, R. , Ramezani, A. and Gholami, R. (2012) regularly came across the following learning style preferences for male students:

- hands-on learning as opposed to female students who prefer a well-organised presentation of course material
- tactile learning
- visual learning
- abstract focus
- active experimentation
- group learning

Previous studies on motivating male language learners

While there does not appear to be many studies specifically looking at motivating male learners to learn English as a second language, there have been studies into native male speakers of English learning some other language as a second language. In many countries where English is the mother tongue (L1) educationalists experience many challenges motivating male learners to learn a second language (L2) such as French or German. They seem to be experiencing a similar problem as in Malaysia; few male learners are interested in studying L2 and many male learners drop the subject when they are able to.

Kissau and Salas (2013) approached this topic of how to motivate male L2 learners by exploring what motivated four boys studying French at an advanced level. Their analysis identified six aspects: interaction in the L2, variety of instruction, technology, outline of objectives, encouragement, and the student-teacher relationship. These learners recalled times when they realised they could use the language for a real conversation as a significant step in motivating them to learn the language. Conversation in the class and learning the language by using it was mentioned by the boys as one of the significant aspects they enjoyed about their class. The teacher of these boys used a wide variety of methods to teach language including puppets, games, music, movies, scavenger hunts, food and technology. The boys felt that the variety of instructional approaches within each class made their learning enjoyable. Technology was particularly appreciated; the teacher used online games, social media, online vocabulary games and Web 2.0 tools. Another factor the students appreciated was the way the teacher outlined long-term goals of the course and short term objectives in classes; the students liked knowing what they were going to learn and seeing that they had learned it afterwards. The boys mentioned the encouragement to study that they had received from family and friends, but they also mentioned the encouragement that they received from the teacher as being significant. The most striking conclusion of this study was that the student-teacher relationship appeared to be more significant than the effective teaching strategies. The boys continually referred to the friendliness of the teacher, someone who cared about them, how she knew about their lives, her enthusiasm,

This teacher made the effort to get to know her students and their lives and really engaged with the students in the class, she had fun with the students and created a

relaxed environment in the class. She knew her students well and personalised the language tasks in class to her students / tailored the activities to the lives of her students

The study by Kissau and Salas (2013) also reinforces a number of other studies that have suggested factors that affect male motivation to learn languages. In their paper they present a very succinct summary of these factors.

Based on their study and a thorough review of the literature on the motivation of male learners to learn languages Kissau and Salas (2013) make a number of recommendations.

- Teachers need to give students a variety of opportunities to engage in conversation and to express themselves in the language
- Course goals and lesson goals need to be made clear so that male learners know what they are supposed to be learning and so that they can gauge their progress.
- There should be a wide variety of teaching approaches with frequent use of technology incorporating social media, phones and Web 2.0 resources.

- Boys need to receive plenty of encouragement to study from their teacher, their institution and family and friends if possible.

- Teachers need to work on developing a close student-teacher relationship getting to know their students and drawing on this in the activities of the classroom. Teachers also need to help students get to know them so that students can see them more as adult friends.

- A relaxed and fun learning atmosphere needs to be created.

In considering how to adapt teaching to engage male learners another useful perspective is to look at the different ways in which male and female learners are motivated. As part of a wider study into learning a foreign language Williams et. al. (2002) found that girls had a greater integrative orientation – that is they were intrinsically motivated to learn the language just for the sake of being able to speak it and be part of the community of speakers. Whereas the boys needed the work to be enjoyable if they were going to do it.

Motivational theory distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is doing something because of some reward the person gets for doing the task such as money, marks, or praise. Intrinsic motivation is motivation from doing the

task. The Intrinsically motivated person gets motivation from the enjoyment of doing the task or completing the task. A study by Kissau (2008) compared the motivation of boys and girls for studying French as a second language. This study found that girls were significantly more intrinsically motivated than boys. The author points out that although teachers can provide extrinsic motivation to boys in the form of rewards etc, this will not help the boys develop intrinsic motivation and could cause the boys to stop learning when there is no longer any extrinisic motivation. Instead the author suggests trying to develop intrinsic motivation by making the study materials more interesting and by helping males set short term goals which they can later see that they have achieved.

Adapting Teaching

In considering how to adapt teaching to engage male learners an excellent example is the Score in French project described by McCall (2011). This is a project to use football as the means to motivate boys in England to learn French as a foreign language while at the same time trying to avoid putting off girls who might not be so interested in football.

In that cultural setting (and likely in other settings) sport is deemed to be a key attribute of masculine identity with football in particular seen to be associated with popular adolescent males. Considering the growing divide in foreign language ability between socio-economic groups football was also chosen as something that is popular with all socio-economic groups.

Score in French consisted of a set of resources for teachers to use to teach French using the theme of football. At the end of the project an inter-school French and football

tournament was arranged in which the referees used French and teams were only allowed to speak French on the football pitch.

Based on previous research on motivation of male language learners the authors of this project excluded transactional language connected with football such as buying tickets or asking about transport to a stadium. Instead the materials focused on making the learning itself enjoyable through games and puzzles. Their review of the literature on motivating boys showed that competitive activities are popular and many of these activities fitted into that category. Based on the idea that to learn a foreign language the student needs to have positive feelings towards the culture and speakers of the language, the materials sought to expand the students' views of the French speaking world by including information about footballers throughout the French speaking world.

This project did not focus on boys to the exclusion of girls. Although football was the theme the contents were designed so that there was plenty of material of interest to those not interested in football such as footballer's wives, women football players, and topics of food and drink included through information on footballers' diets.

The results showed that this was an effective way of making learning a second language more interesting for boys with 77% of boys saying it was more fun with the football theme and 62% saying it was more interesting.

A paper about the similarities between playing World of Warcraft and Content and Language Integrated Learning (Sylven and Sundquvist, 2012) gives the example of a

Swedish boy who became fluent in English by the age of fifteen through watching English speaking TV shows, video games and interacting online with native speakers while playing games. The author suggests that emphasise massively multiplayer, online, role-playing games (MMORPG), of which World of Warcraft is an example, have three factors in common with CLIL that make language learning effective: immersion, authenticity and motivation. MMORPG immerse the player in a virtual world where English is spoken, secondly, in playing MMORPG games the players are not creating an artificial English learning enviroment, they are using English for real purposes. Thirdly, the player has to use English well in order to participate and the better the English the more the player can participate so it is also a environment that provides a lot of intrinsic motivation to learning English.

An obvious question which comes to mind is "Why not form all-boy classes in order to cater to their learning preferences?" Piechura-Couture (***) studies whether single-gender classes could reduce the over-representation of boys in special-education. The boys in the single-gender classes examined in this study showed improved behaviour and improved classroom participation. While single-gender classes may not be practically possible in all situations, and may have additional disadvantages, it does seem to be an effective way to engage male learners.

Practical Approaches to Teaching Male Learners

Based on the studies examined in this paper it is possible to outline some suggested approaches to teaching male learners that are likely to be effective. The lack of literature

on motivation of Malaysian language learners to learn English prevents more detailed recommendations for the Malaysian context.

Based on learning preferences, the teaching should contain tasks which include tactile features -moving, and touching things. Teaching materials should include plenty of visual explanation and approaches should enable plenty of group learning. From studies on motvating male second language learners we can see that teachers should set clear goals for the course and each class and help their male learners see what they have learnt. There should also be a variety of opportunities for male learners to use the langauge for some sort of real purpose of immediate relevance to their lives. Technology should be used in the class and the teacher needs to establish a relaxed and fun learning environment. How would this look like in practice? We will suggest a few ways in which this could be applied to classes.

Messing about with languages

Male learners seem enjoy having fun and playing around, we could let our male learners play around with language. If we take the focus off immediate accuracy and put it more on experimenting that continually uses an ever wider range of language eventually becoming more accurate.

Grammar

In teaching grammatical structures we could use cusinaire rods and cut up words for students to move about and arrange into structures appealing to their preference for visual and kinesthetic learning. We could incorporate more team competitions to solve

grammar puzzles and involve more movement in the classroom. Since male students are not intrinsic learners they are not interested in learning the grammar for the sake of understanding it so we can focus on competitions that appeal to their extrinsic motivations. Students could be encouraged to play around with grammar by giving them sets of words to make into sentences. A focus on accuracy could be promoted by appointing some students as "Grammar Inspectors" who would be given a few grammar rules to check using a checklist.

Receptive Skills – Reading and Speaking

Since male learners will not be focused on reading and listening because the intrinsic satisfaction from enjoying the language we need to make the reading and listening appealing in other ways. Reading and listening texts could contain content that would enable the learners to do something – solve a problem, learn a skill etc. The texts could be based on information that the male learner wants to know or needs to know. For example at a low level a story could contain clues for the students acting as detectives to solve a crime. The male learners would then be reading for a purpose – to get information they want. This could also be connected to a project or group activity where they produce something of real value, such as a model or internet guide.

Writing

Writing could be made more appealing to male learners by having a real purpose that appeals to the male learner. Writing across a period of time could all be part of a project to produce a guide, leaflet or website for a real audience. Students could be allowed the freedom to mess about with language and writing by changing a piece of writing

creatively. For example, given a standard narrative text they could change the characters to super-heroes and change what the characters do and say. Working as a group on this task, and with competition with other groups to produce the most funny story the students are likely to have a lot of fun and learn from their experimentation. This could even be done at a very basic level of proficiency by providing the learner with a set of words that they could substitute into the text.

Speaking

Male students could be given the freedom to mess around with language by creating their own dialogues. Rather than focusing on a 'right way' to carry out a communicative exchange the students could be encouraged to create unusual or funny exchanges. This could be done by giving them contexts appealing to their interests. For example, if the target task was ordering food it could be set in the context of aliens or monsters ordering food. Or some very badly behaved boys ordering food. Accuracy could be focused on by getting the students to write the dialogue which could then be checked by the teacher, or with peer checking using a checklist with a few areas of focus. The students' dialogue could then be compared with a scripted dialogue from a textbook and the students could identify similar phrases and differences. Alternatively, the students could take a script and adjust it to make it more fun by changing the context and / or characters. To appeal the male desire to do things of real relevance to their lives dialogues could be all part of a project to perform a play or acted out and videoed as a mini-film.

Projects, games, online community

Male learners seem to enjoy games, it might be possible with creativity to make a whole English course could in some way be turned into an elaborate game where each class is a stage in the game.

With the male interest in technological tools and with the ease with which people can communicate across the world there seems to be a lot of potential in projects involving communication with students in other countries where the only common language between the countries is English. This would provide a very 'real' context for using language and move the focus onto communicative effectiveness rather than abstract tasks.

Conclusion

There is clearly a lot more that we need to find out about the different preferences between male and female learners and how to motivate them. Looking at Malaysia, there is a considerable gap in knowledge about how male and female learners view the English language and what motivates them to learn English and what de motivates them. Research into these areas would provide some valuable and interesting information.

Although there is a lack of studies on the learning of English in Malaysia, there is much that can be learned from the studies on second language learning in other contexts. The findings from such studies are worth trying in the Malaysian context.

There is much debate about the differences between male and female learners and the best ways to teach them. The best way to help learners, whether male or female would be to try out varieties of approaches and materials. Creativity in teaching in this way is likely to benefit everyone. The only way to really know what works and what is preferred is to try various approaches and then find out how the learners perceive the approach and how much it helps them learn.

Finally, it is worth coming back to the findings by Kissau and Salas (2003) that the relationship the teacher creates with the students may more more important than the teaching approaches. Teachers should avoid getting so focused on approaches that they lose sight of building good relationships with the students and an positive learning environment.

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