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WHERE THE BOYS *AREN'T*: GENDER DEMOGRAPHICS IN THE L2 CLASSROOM

Richard E. Morris
Middle Tennessee State University

Two fall semesters ago, I taught my annual undergraduate course in Spanish pronunciation. Although the class contained only eight students, it was at least a week or more before I made a startling discovery. The entire class, except for me, of course, was made up of women.

Up to that point, I had noticed an imbalance, but I never thought the imbalance was so great that an entire class could go mono-gender. Looking backward over ten plus years of teaching foreign language at the college level, I recall classes that were usually mostly women. Now and then I have analyzed test scores and found that, almost without exception, male students score on average 10% lower than female students.

Is there something about foreign language that is more alluring to female learners than male learners, and if so, what is it? Is it because of a cognitive difference or a social stereotype? Or the teaching methodology itself? Or some combination of the three? To try to answer these questions, I began by looking at some national demographics. Some of these demographics are shown in tables 1 through 5, along with any significant patterns or trends that I observed.

1. Bachelor's degrees awarded in the United States in "foreign languages and literatures" to men and women in four different academic years

	Women		Men		Total
	#	%	#	%	
1967-68	13,049	74.5	4,450	25.4	17,499
1977-78	9,510	76.3	2,938	23.6	12,448
1987-88	7,162	71.8	2,628	26.3	9,970
1997-98	9,090	71.1	3,679	28.8	12,769

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics: "Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS), "Degrees and other awards conferred" surveys, and Integrated Postsecondary Education data System (IPEDS) surveys.)

- ❖ About three-fourths of all bachelor's degrees awarded in foreign language are awarded to women.
- ❖ Overall, FL bachelor's degrees have dropped 28% in 30 years.
- ❖ FL bachelor's degrees awarded to women have dropped 31% in 30 years.
- ❖ FL bachelor's degrees awarded to men have dropped 18% in 30 years.

2. Intended college majors identified by SAT takers: Top 5 subjects by gender disparity (of 23 subjects listed) in 1997

	SAT I Test takers		Percent	
	#	%	male	female
Engineering	88,706	8%	81%	19%
Military Science	5,096	<1	80	20
Computer Science	59,402	6	77	23
Health & Allied Services	172,117	16	27	73
Foreign Languages	5,501	1	28	72

Source: Collegeboard Online (www.collegeboard.org): "College Plans"

- ❖ In terms of gender disparity (imbalance of genders), foreign languages rank fifth out of 23 intended college majors.
- ❖ After health and allied services, foreign language is the second highest female-dominant major, with a ratio similar to college degrees actually awarded (see table 1).

3. High school coursework in foreign languages in 1997

Years of study	SAT I Test takers		Percent	
	Number	Percent	Male	Female
4+ years	266,053	26%	39%	61%
3 years	296,680	29	44	56
2 years	351,684	35	48	52
1 year	53,070	5	54	46

Source: Collegeboard Online (www.collegeboard.org): "Course-taking patterns"

- ❖ A majority of high school students who took only one year of foreign language were boys.
- ❖ Two-thirds of high school students who had taken four or more years of foreign language by the end of high school were girls.

4. Course work in “foreign and classical languages” among American college-bound high school students in 1997

	SAT I Test takers		Gender	
	#	%	Male	Female
Spanish	680,261	65%	45% <	55%
French	250,685	24	38 <	62
Latin	83,652	8	45 <	55
German	68,907	7	52 > (!)	48
Japanese	18,977	2	49 <	51
Italian	17,209	2	44 <	56
Chinese	12,293	1	48 <	52
Russian	9,630	1	45 <	55
Hebrew	8,457	1	46 <	54
Greek	4,420	<1	47 <	53
Korean	3,672	<1	47 <	53

Source: Collegeboard Online (www.collegeboard.org): “Course-Taking Patterns”

- ❖ Gender disparity varies across languages.
- ❖ The languages with the lowest disparities are nontraditional languages.
- ❖ German is the only language in which a majority of students were boys.
- ❖ There is a slight inverse correlation between language popularity and male study.
- ❖ On average, 45.0% of students in traditional languages (Spanish, French, German) were male. This number rises to 47.5% of for non-European languages (Japanese, Chinese, Hebrew, Korean).

5. Gender disparity and national rank for 11 studied languages

Language	Gender disparity	Rank (#, Table 4)
Japanese	2%	5
Chinese	4	7
German	4	4
Greek	6	10
Korean	6	11
Hebrew	8	9
Spanish	10	1
Latin	10	3
Russian	10	8
Italian	12	6
French	24	2

Cf. Table 4.

Students with a high Mathematical score on the SAT tended to be the same students who took nontraditional languages. Students with high Verbal scores tended to be the ones who took Latin and Hebrew, perhaps because they were either drawn to (or were able to tolerate) the heavy textual focus of these two ancient languages. Other languages clustered in the middle, with

comparable Verbal and Mathematical scores. These trends may not be significant, but they do suggest that certain languages may be better suited to certain academic abilities than others.

So now that we are better acquainted with the facts, why do girls show a higher achievement than boys in foreign language, by an increasingly wide margin?

It has often been pointed out, however, that learning a foreign language is the development of a skill and is therefore social in ways that learning other subjects is not. In a 1973 article in the journal *Education*, Thomas Scovel argues that foreign language learning is better classified as a sport than an academic subject, and he makes several insightful observations that we might use as a point of departure:

Language and sports ... deal with the personality of the student in a much more intimate way than do the traditional subjects of educational institutions. Learning a skill, whether it be athletic or linguistic, is a much more personal activity than acquiring academic knowledge. The language student, like the athlete, is exposing himself; his performance is transparent to all, and he is vulnerable to criticism and ridicule (86).

These observations do not refer specifically to gender; if anything, comparing language to a sport has a more stereotypically masculine appeal. However, a bit further on in his article, Scovel makes the following comparison:

Language learning and sports are also related in that they are social activities; their *raison d'être* is to provide an opportunity for people to come together (86).

In other words, foreign language skill development requires the intervention of others, just as any social activity. A typical language class is structured on activities that require not just verbal interaction, but self-disclosure, as pointed out by Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope:

Probably no other field of study implicates self concept and self-expression to the degree that language study does (128).

Here is an example. Beginning textbooks almost always start out by presenting basic vocabulary in a question-and-answer format. Students don't just learn the words for things, they learn how to tell what their name is, how old they are, and where they are from, and also how to ask for this information from their classmates. In class, the main way this knowledge is perfected is through social interaction. The teacher asks the questions and the student answers, or students ask other students. In either case, the student is required to be open on a range of topics, on a regular basis, often with people he or she has not known for very long.

Not surprisingly, the students who thrive in this type of environment are those who are most likely to excel, whereas those who do not thrive in this environment are held back for a complex range of reasons, most of which resemble anxiety issues. In his landmark paper on the topic, Krashen (1964) proposed that language students grapple with an affective filter as a part of their learning; in essence, anxiety interferes with acquisition by lowering the level of receptivity to new input, thereby impeding the student's progress in the target language. A large portion of the acquisition literature done in the 1980s and 1990s explores and substantiates the effects of affect on language learning. For example, Ely (1986) found through direct classroom observation that students who were uncomfortable in class were also less likely to take risks related to learning, or to be sociable in the target language. He also found that active participation went hand in hand with oral correctness. Bacon (1992) examined the interaction of comprehension, processing strategy, cognitive and affective response, and gender among beginning Spanish students, and found that men and women differed widely, although not significantly. For example, in a planned listening comprehension task that involved two passages, women students

reported using a much broader range of strategies than did men. It was also found that for the harder of the two passages, women reported using a wider range of metacognitive strategies for understanding the task: these included many pre-task exercises such as deliberate concentration, advance organization, a sense of plan, as well as an intent to think in Spanish rather than translate, however these findings were not statistically significant. On the other hand men responded to changes in level of difficulty by using more or fewer purely cognitive strategies, such as repeating an unfamiliar word, listening for grammatical structure, inference, or direct translation.

Despite these differences, however, there was not a statistically significant interaction between gender and strategy or gender and comprehension. The only difference that correlated positively with gender was the use of monitor, or self-questioning during the actual task: for example, stopping to ask something as simple as "Am I getting this?" women were more likely to have a lower confidence level than men, but their comprehension was comparable.

Although these observations apply specifically to listening comprehension, we are sure to wonder whether they would hold across other types of potentially stressful tasks, such as writing, reading, or speaking. If so, what implications might this claim have for the social setting in the foreign language classroom? A large body of psychological research suggests that men and women have different modes of operation, particularly with regard to achievement.

Marciano (1981) suggested that the center of gravity of women's motivation to achieve is an orientation to others, whereas the center of gravity for men is oriented toward self-gratification and self-reliance. Indeed, many research studies have confirmed that women generally have much higher levels of motivation than men.

There has been intense research on the actual cognitive differences between men and women in terms of linguistic ability and whether one gender has a natural advantage over the other. One widely discussed difference is behavioral: girls overwhelmingly learn to read before boys. Another difference, which could be related, is cognitive: girls show evidence of lateralization of the language function earlier than boys. Lateralization is the specialization of one hemisphere of the brain for a particular type of task, such as spatial perception. Language function typically lateralizes to the left hemisphere around the end of a child's first decade of life. Lateralization is a crucial development, since it suggests an increase in mental organization and a refinement of ability. What is not completely clear is whether early lateralization of language function among girls actually affords them a *permanent* cognitive advantage over boys, rather than just a *temporary* one. Maccoby & Jacklin's (1974) landmark study *The Psychology of Sex Differences* report that in experiments done in which one gender significantly excelled over the other in verbal skill, the excelling gender was predominantly female. Thus, in 47 such experiments, female subjects excelled over male subjects in 36 experiments, whereas male subjects excelled over female subjects in only 11 experiments. However, it is crucial to note that in an additional 84 experiments, neither gender had an advantage. So it is risky to say that females have a general verbal advantage over males when the advantage is only evident 27% of the time.

In her 1978 book *Sex-Related Cognitive Differences*, Sherman aimed to investigate more thoroughly the body of evidence and revisit several of the claims made by Maccoby and Jacklin. She also suggests social reasons for the fundamental differences. For example, girls develop verbal skills sooner than boys because they identify more readily with their mother than boys do. This enables more rapid development of verbal skills in girls than boys, at least in traditional environments in which most of the caregiving is provided by the mother.

Sherman also provides evidence that children generally perceive reading as a feminine pastime; it is not too surprising, then, that boys might learn to read later than girls since simply because they do not seek to develop their reading skill as diligently. Sex-stereotyping is the association of activities with one sex or the other, based on experience and generalized perceptions. Both boys and girls may hold the same stereotype for a particular activity, and the stereotype may be defined both positively and negatively. For example, a boy may come to

perceive reading as feminine if, in his experience, most of the people around him who read are female, OR if most of the people who *don't* read are male.

Sex-stereotyping is relevant in our discussion of classroom demographics, because it lasts well into adulthood and ultimately affects the motivation of both sexes to succeed. This effect is shown in Stein, Pohly & Mueller (1971), who examined how sex-stereotyping influences the outcome on a task. Child subjects were given three pencil-and-paper tests without any likely strong sex-typing: one on codes, one on alphabets, and one on pictures. Subgroups were told before taking each test that it would measure their future ability to excel in boy subjects (such as shop), girl subjects (such as home economics), or subjects popular for both sexes (such as instrumental music). Each subgroup was given a different presentation, although the task was the same for each. All groups included both boys and girls. The groups were given ten minutes to take the test and instructed not to go back and forth between sections. After the test, subjects were asked to rate each test on difficulty and enjoyment.

The researchers found that boys scored highest on the test when it was presented as masculine-typed and lowest when it was presented as feminine-typed. Boys also spent a larger portion of the allotted time on the masculine-typed section. Girls, however, whereas girls spent roughly equal time on all three sections. The experimenters also found that boys liked the masculine test the most and the feminine test the least, whereas girls tended to like all three tests equally.

This experiment is revealing because it suggests that boys are more strongly influenced by expressed sex-typing, and modify their behavior to excel in tasks that have been presented as male sex-typed. Girls, however, are less influenced by these pressures. What is most striking is that the boys' response to the prescribed sex-typing of the tasks obviously overrides any individual perception the boys may have had regarding the sex-typing of each task to begin with. In other words, it doesn't matter that a boy may have thought shapes were more masculine than pictures; if he was told that pictures were more masculine, he embraced that type-statement and responded accordingly.

One possible reason for this selective achievement was explored by Kagan (1964), who suggests that boys achieve less in school and have more learning and behavioral problems than girls because they identify the school environment as feminine-typed, and therefore have lower motivation and attainment levels. Stockard et al. (1980) identify a perceived correlation between high achievement in school and femininity; specifically, the behavior of good students tends to be seen as feminine, and therefore male sex-typing requires a certain measure of underachievement in order for boys to resist that label.

Looking back at the gender disparities in high school foreign language study, we might conclude that foreign language learning is, for whatever reason, sex-stereotyped as feminine, and therefore less appealing to boys. Stein (1971) shows that the sex-typing of children becomes more, not less, pronounced with age, so we would expect to see a fair amount of sex-typing persist into the late teenage years and early adulthood. Sex-typing of foreign language would explain the course-taking patterns of high school boys, who stop taking foreign language early on while the girls continue (recall table 3).

In college, particularly in a curriculum in which foreign language is required for graduation, enrollment figures are less revealing, since the sexes are more equally represented, at least at the levels required by a degree program. What we might find in college classes, however, is a lower level of achievement among male students that is a reflection of the perceived sex-stereotype. Even in a classroom that has a gender balance, male students may be motivated to achieve but not *as motivated* as their female classmates, simply because their attainment value is not as high. This analysis is supported by a several psychological investigations into motivation levels, which consistently find women to have higher motivation levels than men across a range of areas. Mickelson (1992), which includes a review of these studies, upholds the notion that achievement is linked to motivation:

[T]he effort that students put into their schoolwork and their academic achievement is influenced by students' accurate assessments of the class- and race-linked occupational returns their education is likely to bring them as they make the transition to adulthood (151).

Nicholls (1975) describes an experiment that was carried out to investigate the role of attainment value and gender in achievement-related tasks. Like most studies of this type, it is not a language study but it does provide some relevant insight into how males and females differ in their assignment of attainment value to tasks.

In that study, the experimenters looked at the ability of fourth-grade children to match acute angles shown by shapes in a book with those represented on a nearby wall. Before the test, subjects were given instructions containing either a low or high attainment value. For example, the high attainment instructions told subjects that the test was a measure of how smart they would be in a couple of years. The low attainment instructions told subjects that it was merely a test of how well they can tell the size of objects at a distance.

After the experiment, the experimenters asked the children to predict their score on the test, as well as gauge their anxiety level. They were also asked to evaluate the reasons for their self-score, such as the ease of the test, how hard they tried, how lucky they felt, and so on.

The results showed a marginally significant interaction between sex and attainment value; boys claimed to feel more positive about the test when the attainment value was high, whereas girls claimed to feel more positive about the test when the attainment value was low. Nicholls states, "It appears that boys enjoy the challenge of an important ability assessment, while girls feel better at the prospect of a less important test" (p. 386).

These findings lend further support to our theory that male achievement in foreign language classes is notoriously low. In simplest terms, male students fail to be fired up by the challenge of learning a foreign language, since they perceive the challenge as having a low return for the effort required. Female students are less constrained by this type of thinking, and so are able to enjoy the challenge of learning a language for its own sake. These findings may also help explain why males are more drawn to the nontraditional languages, especially those that use unfamiliar alphabets or are native to unfamiliar cultures, since these clearly pose a greater challenge.

Earlier we touched on the fact that sex stereotypes are social in nature; that is, they are based upon a generalized sense of how other people normally act. If stereotypes are social, then they are most certainly learned. We do find that the low attainment value that males assign to learning a second language depends, at least in part, on the culture in which the learner lives. Whereas native English-speaking learners generally do show a correlation between gender and achievement, native speakers of other languages do not necessarily show this correlation. So the social dimension is just as inescapable as the learned stereotypes, and is likely to influence attainment levels and achievement as well.

By social dimension I am referring specifically to interaction in the classroom, whether between students and teachers or between students and students. Most typically, a language classroom is a highly social place, and as such it makes social demands on all the participants. Yet we have no reason to think that all students thrive in this setting with equal degrees of success, and this is no less true for male and female students. Almost all available research suggests that women and men use language differently, sometimes profoundly so, and behave differently in social settings. So part of the gender imbalance we see in our classes probably also revolves more remotely around these differences in communication style. I should hurry to point out that whether or not these styles are innate or learned is beside the point - the fact is that they are present in our culture, and, like any aspect of culture, have the potential to assist or interfere with learning.

Exactly how robust are the differences? Tannen (1986) devotes an entire chapter of her book *That's Not What I Meant!* to how men and women's conversational styles differ. She proposes that men and women don't just speak differently, but they also *use* language differently, to accomplish different tasks. These patterns begin early in life, when boys and girls are playing in same-sex groups. This behavior is documented in Malz and Borker (1982). First of all, little girls and little boys do not just do different things when they play together, but they also *play* in different ways, and use play to different ends. For girls, play typically involves the building of group rapport, and this is usually achieved through talking. For this reason, girls tend to prefer small groups to large groups. Their play tends to be very cooperative in nature, with an emphasis on sharing things, such as secrets.

Boys, on the other hand, prefer to play in larger groups, and place a greater emphasis on *doing* than on *talking*. When boys do talk, it is usually to assert status or compete in some way with the others, for example to show who is 'best' at doing something. Groups of boys tend to fall into hierarchies, with the verbally dominant boys at the top and the verbally complacent boys at the bottom. Talk is an integral part of this structure, and is used to move upward within the structure, for example, through entertaining stories, jokes, challenges, and sidetracks. The most favorably regarded boys are the ones who are both good at performing these displays of power, and also at withstanding the challenges of others.

Along with Maltz and Borker, Tannen proposes that this all-too-familiar playground social structure stays with us subliminally into our adult years, and colors the way in which we use language. As a result, a conversation between a man and a woman can mean very different things to the man and the woman. Women see conversation as a way of showing involvement and care. Men see language as a way of providing 'need-to-know' information. Women and men typically run into trouble when they find themselves using language at cross-purposes.

Other studies have found that men and women use specific communication patterns differently, for example, asking questions, or nodding while someone else is speaking, or smiling, or sustaining eye contact. Some of these findings are gathered in table 6.

6. General tendencies in same-sex and cross-sex communication

In same-sex and cross-sex conversations...		
Women tend to...	But men tend to...	Source(s)
build rapport	compete	Hirshman (1978) Hall (1984) Hall & Braunwald (1981) Braunwald & Mroz (1982) James & Drakich (1993) Holmes (1995)
be more comfortable discussing personal matters	be less comfortable discussing personal matters	Haas & Sherman (1982) Aries & Johnson (1983)
ask more questions	ask fewer questions	Hirshman (1973) Fishman (1978)
use broader vocal pitch range	use narrower vocal pitch range	Brend (1971)
use more emotional references	use fewer emotional references	Mulac, Lundell & Bradac (1985)
make more eye contact	make less eye contact	La France & Mayo (1979) Smythe et al. (1985) Ellyson et al. (1980) Smythe & Huddleston (1992)
smile more	smile less	Smythe & Huddleston (1992)
show more positive response when listening	show less positive response when listening	Zimmerman & West (1975) Fishman (1978) Duncan & Fiske (1977) Roger & Schumaker (1983)
encourage response and interaction	be indifferent to response and interaction	Fishman (1978)
make fewer statements of fact and opinion	make more statements of fact or opinion	Fishman (1978) Strodbeck & Mann (1956) Soskin & John (1963)
make indirect statements	make direct statements	Rundquist (1992)

7. Essential gender differences - recap (cf. table 6)

Women

establish rapport
share by *talking*
smaller groups
language is therapeutic
more positive interaction

Men

establish dominance
share by *doing*
larger groups
language is confrontational
less positive interaction

What is most intriguing here is how much more the social setting in a foreign language class calls upon the communication strategies favored by women (either stereotypically or empirically, it makes no difference) than those favored by men. In fact, much of our teaching

methodology places a higher value on communication styles that are feminine-typed, whereas masculine-typed styles are often plainly discouraged.

Take, for example, Curran's (1972) book *Counseling-Learning: A Whole Person Model for Education*. This book advances a teaching methodology that remains influential precisely because it clarifies the importance of the classroom as a comfortable and comforting social setting:

[S]ome of the most significant learning in adulthood as well as in childhood is most enjoyable because it occurs with and through other people. It is neither competitive nor selective. Rather, it is a growth process. Such an atmosphere, like an atmosphere that provides adequate air and food, offers to each person the encouragement, stimulation, warmth, and deep sense of belonging that seem to be necessary for any personality growth and development at all (19).

The motivation for learning is based not on the rule but on the deep warmth and closeness of the relationship. This would be similar to the relationship of mother and child in the very first stages of linguistic learning. These early stages seem to determine the degree, the half-life, and the strength of the vectors that cause the adult to continue to struggle to perfect his knowledge of the foreign language, even when he can adequately be understood and can adequately express himself in all his ordinary pragmatic needs. Because of this, he is able spontaneously to experience an underlying order in knowledge. Thus he is motivated to internalize the rules (36).

As teachers, we probably subscribe to these principles generally if not absolutely. Few of us would deny the importance of building rapport with students and creating a climate in which they can comfortably build rapport with each other, since we know that these are the conditions required for effective skillbuilding. Yet perhaps we might reevaluate some of our social emphases, and consider whether they are truly accessible to all learning styles. For example:

Emphasis on rapport

One essential feature of the communicative/proficiency method of teaching foreign language that we all probably draw upon has been student-centered activity rather than teacher-centered activity. This means that, at every stage, the teacher is preparing the students to interact with each other. This student-student interaction takes place in a variety of ways, through guided conversations, freestyle conversations, task-oriented conversations, and role-plays or simulations. Each requires students to work together in groups, often in pairs. In the first chapter of the beginning Spanish text *VISTAS*, about half of the 39 guided activities require students to work with a partner to accomplish a certain task. Thus the ability to build rapport on short notice in a short time frame is essential to in-class success.

Emphasis on sharing by speaking

In class, student achievement is measured by the accuracy in which they accomplish certain tasks in the target language. This expectation penalizes students who are not used to having their verbal expression scrutinized, and favors students who are verbally expressive and responsive to the subtleties of conversation in the native language. The alternative, learning by doing, may appeal more readily to students who place a lower attainment value on the sharing of personal information. For example, rather than asking students to obtain information about each others' weekend activities in a controlled conversation, we might ask students - one by one - to act out an activity and then call on a student to identify the action.

Emphasis on smaller groups over larger groups

Students may interact directly with the teacher while the rest of the class watches and listens, but few if any activities in beginning Spanish texts require students to interact with the class as a whole. Most texts emphasize working with a partner, i.e. in pairs. Only occasionally do activities call for 3 or more students. In a study on gender differences in foreign language learning among British high school students, Graham Rees (1995) found that the genders disagreed on the optimal group size for different classroom activities. For example, girls generally disliked oral activities that involved the class as a whole, yet preferred speaking in smaller groups. It is interesting that while girls expressed fear of negative evaluation in such activities, boys were unconcerned by this type of evaluation.

Graham and Rees note that their findings contradict what the literature typically says about boys, namely that boys are reluctant to speak out in the public arena. Those two authors suggest that boys might see large-group activities as a chance to be seen by others as having opinions and competing for the floor. They suggest varying group sizes to allow for the emergence of different social dynamics and styles. We should keep in mind that many of the older teaching methods, such as Curran's Counseling-Learning and Gattegno's Silent Way commonly used as their focus the entire classroom.

Emphasis on therapeutic language

Students in foreign languages classes share volumes of personal information with classmates and with the class as a whole. This information is shared sometimes voluntarily, sometimes in question-and-answer formats. There is a strong emphasis on making the setting as unthreatening as possible, so that students may feel comfortable to "open up" without fearing mockery or humiliation. In this sense, class resembles a support group, in which the teacher is the therapist, the "issue" is the students' inability to communicate, and "healing" comes through structured self-expression. One way to break out of this pattern might be to counterbalance it with elements of competition. For example, I routinely review material in an all-or-nothing game-show format in which the students are the contestants. Although the task has great potential to be threatening, many students have voiced a favorable opinion of the format, saying that it forces them to think fast, and many seem to benefit from this kind of pressure. The competitive edge - a feeling that something more is at stake than just the sharing of information - may be the missing catalyst in many of our classes. Of course, it would need to be applied in moderation.

Emphasis on cultured interaction

Textbook activities typically reinforce discursive structures like question-asking and turn-taking. This means that both members of a pair are expected to participate about 50-50, with each one providing a response to the other before continuing. This type of cultured language is actually artificial. But are there are times when the norms of cultured conversation need not apply? Do all interactions need to be based on student A asking a question and student B responding, and then student B asking a question and student A responding?

These points of interest might be areas in which we could broaden our approach to appeal more equitably not only to masculine- and feminine-typed learning styles, but also to their corresponding communication styles in general. Of course, "male" and "female" are absolute terms; students of both genders fall along a continuum between these two asymptotes, and their location on the continuum is certain to vary depending on any number of affective or situational factors. So the most constructive way of looking at gender is not so much as a state of *being* but

rather an act of *doing*. By defining gender in this way, we capture the fact that men and women seldom follow strict gender lines, as pointed out by Cameron (1997: 60):

Performing masculinity or femininity ‘appropriately’ cannot mean giving exactly the same performance regardless of the circumstances. It may involve different strategies in mixed and single-sex company, in private and in public settings, in the various social positions (parent, lover, professional, friend) that someone might regularly occupy in the course of everyday life.

In other words, we reconfigure our communication strategies as we move from one social setting to another. Each of these strategies is likely to be stereotyped to some degree, based on how often we see men and women using those strategies, so stereotypes are self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating.

To conclude, I wish to reiterate several central issues:

First, the ratio of men to women pursuing foreign language study, as measured by bachelor's degrees awarded, is decreasing.

Second, whether this skewed ratio is an effect of innate or social factors is probably irrelevant to the issue of gender disparity in our classrooms. Either type is thoroughly ingrained in a person's psyche from a very early age, as the many child studies suggest, and there is little evidence to indicate that these attitudes can be easily unlearned or revised. On the contrary, these attitudes become stronger as children grow older.

Third, although both sexes assign stereotypes to different tasks and activities, boys appear more likely than girls to let these stereotypes interfere with their actual achievement. Boys pursue masculine-typed tasks more diligently than feminine-typed tasks, whereas girls assign the tasks equal importance. This has consequences for motivation levels in a feminine-typed subject, such as foreign language.

Fourth, boys and girls differ in their assignment of attainment value to tasks. Boys pursue high-attainment tasks more voraciously than do girls. In at least one controlled experiment, girls were not only less susceptible to the pressure of a high attainment value, but they actually responded more favorably when the activity was presented with a low attainment value.

Fifth and finally, foreign language teaching methodology draws upon and reinforces what we know to be more feminine-typed communicative values, such as rapport-building and collaboration. It stands to reason that the student - male or female - who is most likely to adapt and thrive under that methodology is one who is already quite comfortable using feminine-typed styles.

If we have managed to identify general characteristics of “male” and “female” language learning trends, we have not necessarily arrived at any powerful conclusion about how we might slow the growing gender disparity in our classrooms. But we can say with confidence that there are students who are strongly motivated by sex stereotypes, and these may potentially interfere with or reinforce language skillbuilding. For now, the best solution is to accept that the traditional social structure constructed in our foreign language classrooms is not always the *best* structure for *all* the students present, and it behooves us continually to revise and revisit our teaching strategies to accommodate this reality.

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Richard E. Morris
Foreign Languages and Literatures Department
Middle Tennessee State University
Murfreesboro, TN 37132

rmorris@mtsu.edu