

Reading and Gender Effect on Writing Style: Case of Hungarian Learners of English

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Abstract

The present study tests language production of 15 Hungarian students, 16 of age, enrolled in the EFOP-3.2.14-17-2017-00003 project, aimed at promoting English in the Trans-Danubian regions, during 12 weeks following the B1+ framework beforehand prepared by the pedagogical office at the University of Pannonia. 58 essays, from various themes, have been analyzed following a similar approach to Van Heuven et al. 2017, in their study on Gender effects and writing styles. Using AntConc concordance software (Anthony, 2012, 2013) and tagging with CLAWS5, a word list was generated with over 6229 lines equally distributed between males and females. Reading-factor and gender-based grouping were systematically used as predictor models to visualize production complexity on the morpho-syntactic and semantic levels. Parameters such as sentence length, mean word length, content and finite verbs, punctuations, complexity and TT were essential for this comparison. Better writers use longer words, use more different words (so show a higher type/token ratio and/or higher Lexical Diversity (D), and most important of all, use more complex sentences (more finite verbs relative to their total number of words). According to the ANOVA, the Gender effect ($p = .750$) is larger than the Reading effect ($p = .485$) based on the partial Eta squared η^2 .

Extracurricular reading yields better writing but only for the girls – it does not work for the boys.

Keywords: Extracurricular Reading, Gender Differences, Morpho-Syntactic Complexity, Semantic Levels, Type/Token Ratio, Lexical Diversity

1- Introduction

This article summarizes the language development of a select number of high school students during a semester, through collecting their creative writing on various topics. The collected essays were then presented to their teacher who raised the hypothesis that readers may produce lengthy and richer essays than their peers. Having done a similar research with professor van Heuven, Al Tamimi et al. in 2017, more hypotheses surfaced. The group was heterogenous consisting of students from different socio-economic status and interests. The discussions with their teacher after classes rose the curiosity to compare whether boys used more eloquent and unique vocabulary compared to girls, which aligns with Otto Jespersen's (1922) statement, and whether their reading habit enriched their vocabulary regardless of gender. This assumption led their teacher to inquire who was an avid reader among the group to be marked as case study. Throughout the semester, a group of girls actively participated in class and produced impressive quality essays. For this purpose, all the essays were collected to visualize these differences.

2 - Participants and general information

The present study tracks EFL development for 15 Hungarian pupils, aged 16 years old, at Fekete István - Vörösmarty Mihály Általános Iskola és Gimnázium in Ajka (mixed proficiency levels) in 10th grade during 12 weeks, 90 minutes each session. The proposed lesson themes are provided by the University of Pannonia according to the B1+ framework as discussed at teachers consultation with the project supervisor. All the topics were taught story-based following coherent modules, with the help of realia and videos, to build up to the

production phase (essay writing). Essays have been collected regularly, including the individual and group work submissions, then kept in paper and digital forms. A series of variables will be looked at and compared throughout this longitudinal study (quantitative analysis) taking into consideration the word length, sentence length, syntactic-morphological complexity and vocabulary frequency. The data amounts to 12 sessions, 58 essays and 6229 words. All participants reported their written acceptance regarding their participation in the university program. Next to this, participants were fully informed regarding the objectives of the secondary study conducted by their teacher (me), while they were reassured that their answers were treated as confidential and used only for academic purposes.

3 - Research questions

To what extent complexity, as in morpho-syntactic and semantic levels, and essay length correlate for English learners at an Intermediate level? Which predictor is the most important in explaining our results: Gender influence on writing style or extracurricular reading in English?

4 - Literature

4.1 - Classrooms

Classrooms have not been homogenously reserved for monolinguals over the past decade enriched by various linguistic backgrounds, while other means of acquisition manifest interaction of languages, so the rigid monolingual approach to teaching was questioned for its demeaning aspect to learners' competence in the target language and limitation to their skills, and views on languages as separate and autonomous. It is generally agreed that multilingual competence develops with multilingual practices (Jessner, 2008). Having developed those metacognitive strategies, bi/multilinguals are privileged with „numerous linguistics means from a multilingual repertoire” (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015) enhancing their learning

experience, given that multilingual speakers' linguistic and cognitive abilities are not separate (Hofer, 2015).

4.2 - Instruction-based learning

Instructional approaches had widely accepted the inhibition of students dominant language to optimize L2 learning, viewing languages as separate and non cumulative, which is in contrast with bi/multilingualism understandings regarding languages as dynamic, cumulative and non-linear (Herdina & Jessner, 2002; Garcia & Flores, 2012) and studies that underlie language interactions in the learning process (Cummins, 2017). Learners may resort to their L1 prior knowledge to reflect on L2 learning (Alegria de la Colina & Garcia Mayo, 2009), providing the said previously acquired knowledge is encoded in their L1 (Cummins, 2008). Teaching for transfer is central to multilingual classroom and „opens up their language awareness in learning the L2” because languages are constantly activated and share relevant skills. Languages are cumulative in the sense of building up on common skills, based on holistic and dynamic understandings of multilingualism, which is due to high L1 proficiency level and exposure to the target language (Cummins, 2008).

4.3 – Complex Dynamic Systems

Complex dynamic systems represent the connecting and interacting systems that are in constant change over time and are characterized by their non-linearity. Through elements interaction and interrelation, a system seems to adapt to new factors and self-organize showing new patterns and development (*Cameron & Deignan, 2006*).

4.4 – Words in lexicon and syntax theories

In language teaching, a word is a basic unit of meaning and an important constituent for vocabulary acquisition (*O’Keeffe, McCarthy, & Carter, 2007*). Language is essentially a grouping of words, and rules governing complex units (*Cruse, 2001*) which form sentences. The basic units form a language lexicon specific to their respective language and grammar

rules. Most languages categorize these basic units into finite and infinite words (*Baker, 2001*) and the combination order of these finite and infinite units into phrases, clauses, or sentences.

5 - Methodology

The university had administered grammar-based online tests as initial measurement to roughly estimate the class language proficiency, then the essays were produced in class. For the purposes of this research, essays were categorized by sessions and topics. As far as data collection tools were concerned, the conduction of the research involves the use of SPSS, antconc, and UCREL CLAWS5 tagset. The method of purposive sampling is also used to develop the sample of the research under discussion. First, the written essays had to be entered as plain texts digitally to be simplified and ran through AntConc concordance software (Anthony, 2012, 2013). Then, a word list for each text with generated token frequencies. The texts were afterwards uploaded to the part-of-speech tagger CLAWS to compute sentence length and other relevant variables. Counting the occurrences of tags, the number of content words and finite verbs have been determined.

6 - Results and discussion

The dataset contained 58 essays, 15 written by male and female high school students. The total number of words amounted to 6186, almost equally distributed between the sexes (2369 for the male sample and 3799 for the female authors) and tokens (1223 for males and 1702 for females) The lengths of individual texts varied considerably. The software-based analysis generated 6229 lines. A series of variables were accounted for to compare produced essays such as D complexity index, determined using D_Tools software, type/token ratio, content words and finite verbs, generated from CLAWS5, word and sentence length, indicated by antconc software as shown in table 1. Gender was not the only determining factor for effectiveness as individual variance exists within the same group.

Factor	Groups	N	Words		D-complexity		Content Words		Finite Verbs		Word Length		Sentence Length	
			Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Gender	Male	8	296.13	40.6	67.15	8.8	72.4	10.1	28	5.85	4.04	.188	1.95	.08
	Female	7	<u>542.71</u>	<u>342.13</u>	75.71	19.4	<u>158.57</u>	<u>114.8</u>	<u>104.7</u>	<u>90.8</u>	3.93	.124	2.15	.26
Reading	Yes	6	<u>598.5</u>	<u>339.78</u>	84.51	9.7	174	117.4	115.1	94.9	4.02	.18	2.16	.3
	No	9	286.33	40	62.23	10.1	71.67	10.15	29.56	5.52	3.96	.162	1.97	.06

Table 1 – Essay components based on Gender and Reading-factor

Sentence length and word length within groups and between groups are not directly influenced by either gender or extracurricular reading separately, as ANOVA shows, with p-value > .05 determining that the condition means were significantly different. Therefore the question lies in whose writing style was more influenced through reading. Among the determining variables, prevalence of finites ought to display the complexity relying on (1) reading factor (2) gender, as shown in figure 1.

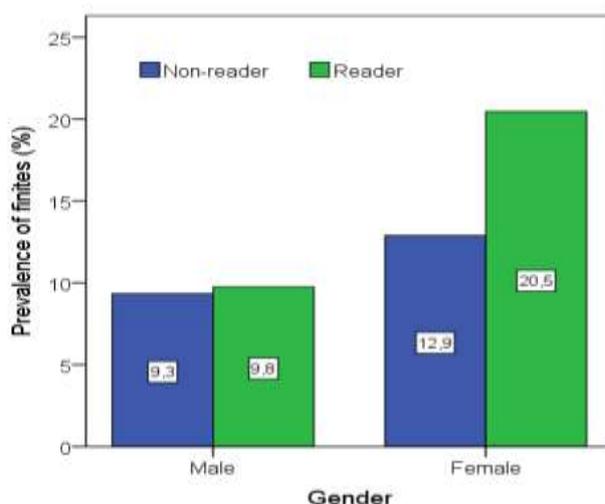


Figure 1 – Gender-based comparison of finites prevalence with focus on the reading-factor

So what happens when students produce more texts? Student status effect on finite verb prevalence, number of characters in a word, Type/Token (T/T) ratio and total words.

Figure 2 shows students' total words produced, type/token ratio, word length and finite verbs count, square rooted to fit into grouped comparison. Female readers show the highest score in finite verbs and total words.

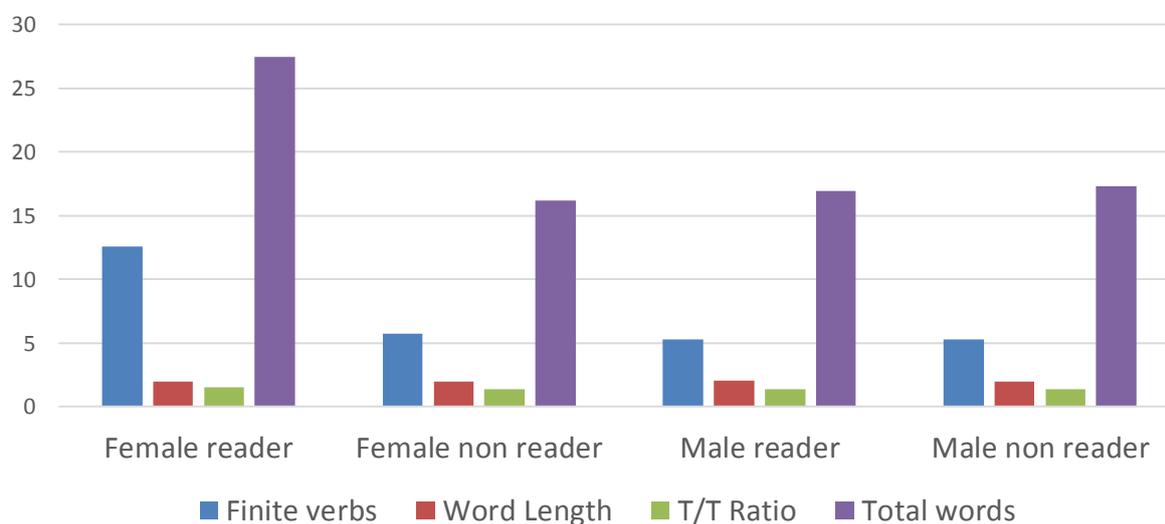


Figure 2 – Grouped variables between and within groups

Lengthy essays in this study are associated with sophisticated words, longer sentences, more expressions and so on. Reading yields an effect on writing style for girls, which relatively influences boys'; while male readers wrote longer words, but not as lexically diverse as female readers and surprisingly less than both categorical non readers. On the one hand, boys have similar tendency regarding finite verbs. On the other hand, female readers produce longer and more complex essays, as shown in the token-to-type ratio and other parameters. Reading significantly affects semantic capacity of both genders. However, punctuation marks have not been generally used as the students lack the initiation to experiment with the language.

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