

# Interpersonal Factors to Hamper Boys' L2 Learning and Their Implications for L2 Teaching

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第二言語学習や外国語学習（L2 学習）に対して、男子生徒は女子生徒よりも関心が低く、成績も低迷する傾向が強いことが指摘されてきた。これは生物学的な性差だけでなく、社会的要因や対人的要因にも起因するとする先行研究がある。本研究では、バイリンガル地域で行われた 2 つの先行研究レビューから、中等教育段階の男子生徒の L2 学習に影響を及ぼし得る「男らしさ」と「励まし」という要因に着目し、男子生徒に対する L2 教育への示唆と、その改善策を検討した。

**Key words:** 第二言語学習, ジェンダー, 男子生徒, 対人的要因, 男らしさ, 励まし

## 1. Introduction

*“Boys are poorer in foreign languages in nature.”*

*“Boys are generally less interested in language.”*

I have heard such comments made by my colleagues in my career as an EFL teacher. In my view, some L2 teachers view boys as being less interested in L2 and less likely to succeed in L2 learning.

In fact, the gender gap between boys and girls in L1 and L2 achievement has been found across countries. For example, OECD (2018) shows that girls outperformed boys in L1 reading across all OECD countries. Similarly, recent research in Britain on L2 learning shows boys' underachievement, claiming that being male makes students less likely to achieve a higher grade of foreign language achievement (Collen, 2020).

Boys' disinterest in L1 and L2 learning has also been shown by some researchers or in surveys (Carr, 2002; Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Evans et al., 2002; Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2019; Kaahwa et al., 2023; Kobayashi, 2002; Maynard, 2004; Stafford et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2002). For example, a survey in Japan shows that the percentage of elementary school boys and junior high school boys who answer that they like Japanese (L1) and English (L2) is consistently lower than that of girls (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, *ibid*). According to Evans et al. (*ibid*), who investigated gender differences

in the interest and knowledge of 11th grade students in the United States, Taiwan and Japan, the strength of the relation between gender and preference for school subject was larger than that for culture and preference for school subject. Across these three places, girls were more likely to like language arts than boys. Considering these, gender seems to be a crucial factor in predicting participation, engagement and success in L2 learning.

However, some studies on L1 achievement have shown that social factors affect boys' L1 learning and its achievement. For example, a study in Germany shows that boys' lower L1 achievement was not simply explained by their lower verbal aptitude, but also by some other social factors, including their parents' perceptions of child's L1 ability. (Heyder et al., 2017). Another study on L1 achievement in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, shows that boys were much more subject to the class relationship with teachers, the class integration in the class, and the class motivation toward learning tasks than girls were (Van de gaer et al., 2006). For example, boys performed better in Dutch, their L1, “in classes where students had a good relationship with teachers than in classes where students had a bad relationship with teachers” (p. 402). Also, it was shown that boys were influenced more strongly than girls by the mean motivation of the same-sex classmates. Those studies above suggest that social and interpersonal factors as well as gender must be taken into

consideration when thinking of boys' language learning.

Does the same go for boys' L2 learning? Carr and Pauwels (2006, p.36) claim that the underachievement of L2 learning among boys is "crucially impacted by other variances" though gender remains a predictor. Then, what kind of variances other than mere gender differences influence or hamper boys' L2 learning?

The aim of this paper is to investigate what interpersonal factors make it difficult for boys to learn L2 by briefly reviewing two studies on boys' L2 learning, and thereby to organize some implications for L2 teaching to boys. First, Portelli (2006) and Kissau (2007), both of which focused on boys at secondary schools, will be reviewed briefly. Second, two topics from the studies above will be discussed in more detail to examine what interpersonal factors make boys' L2 learning difficult. Then, some implications and suggestions for L2 teaching to boys will be discussed.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Masculinity

Portelli (2006) focused on Maltese boys' attitudes toward their two official languages as school subjects. More specifically, the researcher investigated whether the boys' ideas and values (their cultures) had an influence on their language choice of either Maltese (their L1) or English (their L2). The subjects are boys at an all-boys' secondary school in Malta, where the phenomenon of bilingualism is a part of their daily lives. The students were classified into three age groups: namely, 12-year-olds, 14-year-olds and 16-year-olds. The questionnaire and the interview were the chief instruments of the data collection. The questionnaires were distributed to 126 students in two classes in each of the age categorization. By analyzing the answers on the questionnaires, the author tried to answer three sub-research questions. Firstly, what is the school subject that the students like and dislike most? Secondly, which subjects do the boys think are appropriate for either boys or girls? Lastly, do the boys' own school peer cultures have any influence on their language choice?

The findings of this study are as follows. The boys' favorite subjects were PE (51%), science (44%) and math (37%). The boys' least favorite subjects were Maltese (62%), English (48%) and math (45%). Of the five least

favorite subjects, three were languages (Maltese, English and foreign languages). This supports the idea among some L2 teachers that boys do not like to learn L2.

With regard to the subjects regarded as being appropriate for each sex, it was found that while around 60 % of them think English and Maltese were appropriate for both sexes, only 3 % of them think English was appropriate for boys and only 6 % of them think Maltese was for girls (see **Table 1**). Portelli (p. 418) claims that "Maltese is a male subject whilst English is a female subject" for the Maltese boys.

**Table 1 Subjects appropriate for each gender (%)**

| Subjects         | For boys | For girls | For both |
|------------------|----------|-----------|----------|
| PE               | 74       | 1         | 25       |
| IT               | 49       | 10        | 41       |
| Math             | 38       | 26        | 36       |
| Maltese          | 37       | 6         | 57       |
| Science          | 33       | 25        | 42       |
| Foreign Language | 16       | 20        | 64       |
| English          | 3        | 30        | 67       |

As for the influence of peer culture on the boys' attitudes toward English and Maltese, the researcher found three main groups among 12-year-olds and 16-year-olds: namely, the footballers, the sportsmen and the bookworms among the 12-year-olds, and the sportsmen, the academic achievers and the Saturday night guys among the 16-year-olds. He found five main groups among 14-year-olds: namely, the sportive boys, the music fans, those keen on computers, the nerds and the bullies. Each group had its own ways of enacting boyhood but there were many overlapping pupil cultures among them. He also found the hierarchical relationship among those groups. Broadly speaking, across the age-groups, the sportsmen, the Saturday night guys and bullies enjoy a high level of prestige while the nerds are targeted by the majority as the others. Interestingly, "the nerds" included those who spoke English in a bilingual context. If it could be said that the sportsmen or bullies are masculine, those who speak English among the boys might be regarded as being feminine. The figures shown in **Table 2** and **Table 3** indicate that the boys regard English as being feminine and Maltese as being masculine. In addition, as they grow older, the figures become much larger.

**Table 2 Attitude toward Speaking English (%)**

| Attitude                                    | 12Y | 14Y | 16Y |
|---------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Speaking English as "female"                | 38  | 49  | 66  |
| Speaking English as "male"                  | 0   | 5   | 0   |
| Speaking English appropriate for both sexes | 62  | 46  | 34  |

**Table 3 Attitude toward Speaking Maltese (%)**

| Attitude                                    | 12Y | 14Y | 16Y |
|---------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Speaking Maltese as "female"                | 0   | 0   | 1   |
| Speaking Maltese as "male"                  | 31  | 49  | 48  |
| Speaking Maltese appropriate for both sexes | 69  | 51  | 51  |

## 2.2. Encouragement

Kissau (2007) investigated whether gender differences exist in the amount of encouragement that students receive to continue studying French as a foreign language. Data was collected from the students in Ontario, Canada, which is a typical bilingual country, through a questionnaire. A total of 490 students completed the questionnaire. Of those students, 254 were girls and 236 were boys. Their ages ranged from 13 to 18, but most of them (74 %) were 14 years old. Of the 490 students, 122 (approximately 25%) indicated that they planned to study French the following year. 202 students (41.2%) had not yet decided, and 166 students (33.9%) stated that they did not intend to continue to study French. Of the 122 students who planned to keep studying French, only 28.7% (35 students) were boys while 71.3% (87 students) were girls. In addition, of the 166 students who did not intend to study French, 115 were boys.

Data was collected from the students through a questionnaire, the goal of which was to evaluate student perceptions of the degree of encouragement they had received to study French. Students were required to circle a number on a 7-point Likert scale that corresponded to their response. An answer of 7 would indicate strongest agreement. In analyzing the data, a multiple analysis of variance procedure (MANOVA) was conducted.

Findings are as follows. As shown in **Table 4**, the boys perceived themselves as receiving less encouragement to keep studying French from their parents, peers and teachers than did the girls. Also, as **Table 5**, **Table 6**, and **Table 7** show, encouragements are consistently important factors for the girls' continuing to study French the

following year. It should be noted, as **Table 6** shows, that the boys who intended to continue to study French felt that they had received very little encouragement (2.24 point) from their peers, which could reduce their rate of taking French.

**Table 4 Means and SDs for Encouragement**

| Factors                | Boys |      | Girls |      |
|------------------------|------|------|-------|------|
|                        | Mean | SD   | Mean  | SD   |
| Parental Encouragement | 3.21 | 1.3  | 3.93  | 1.32 |
| Peer Encouragement     | 4.09 | 0.93 | 4.69  | 0.95 |
| Teacher Encouragement  | 4.19 | 1.01 | 4.85  | 0.92 |

**Table 5 Means and SDs for Parental Encouragement**

| Keep studying French? | Boys |      | Girls |      |
|-----------------------|------|------|-------|------|
|                       | Mean | SD   | Mean  | SD   |
| Yes                   | 3.86 | 1.13 | 4.46  | 1.26 |
| Unsure                | 3.35 | 1.29 | 3.8   | 1.28 |
| No                    | 2.91 | 1.29 | 3.36  | 1.24 |

**Table 6 Means and SDs for Peer Encouragement**

| Keep studying French? | Boys |      | Girls |      |
|-----------------------|------|------|-------|------|
|                       | Mean | SD   | Mean  | SD   |
| Yes                   | 2.24 | 1.07 | 4.67  | 1.33 |
| Unsure                | 4.27 | .90  | 4.56  | 1.13 |
| No                    | 4.07 | .07  | 4.25  | .93  |

**Table 7 Means and SDs for Teacher Encouragement**

| Keep studying French? | Boys |      | Girls |      |
|-----------------------|------|------|-------|------|
|                       | Mean | SD   | Mean  | SD   |
| Yes                   | 4.89 | 1.40 | 5.42  | .95  |
| Unsure                | 4.09 | 1.19 | 4.92  | 1.08 |
| No                    | 3.94 | 1.33 | 4.10  | 1.44 |

## 3. Discussion

Based on the results or findings of the two studies above, some implications and suggestions for L2 teachers working at institutions for secondary and tertiary education will be discussed below, referring, where possible, to my own teaching experience at KOSEN.

Portelli (2006) showed that speaking L2, or learning L2, was regarded as being feminine even in a context where the use of L2 was common in their daily lives. It was also shown that students who spoke English (their L2) was teased across all the age groups just because they chose L2 to communicate with friends instead of their L1, Maltese. English is a lingua franca in the modern world

and the most dominant world language of all. Nevertheless, speaking it led to a tease. Which of the two languages is more influential seems to be of little importance to them. Speaking English among friends itself went against their peer cultures or the context's notion of masculinity. Similarly, Qin (2018) claims that boys' L2 learning internalizes notions of masculinity, and that this makes it difficult for L2 teachers to teach them L2 and for boys to learn L2. All L2 teachers need to be aware of the complexity of boys' L2 learning.

Masculinity is not an individual attribute, but it is formed within each group that people belong to (Talbot, 2019). In other words, boys gradually learn and acquire masculinity, interacting with each other. Importantly, concerning the relation between boys and masculinity, Talbot claims that "boys have to prove their masculinity constantly" (p.157). This implies that at least some boys are required to try to look cool in front of their friends. An ELT educator Harmer (2001) states that peer approval is considered important for the adolescent boys and girls. However, it is assumed that this applies more to boys than to girls. All L2 teachers need to keep these in mind in designing their lessons.

To help boys prove their masculinity in L2 lessons, I suggest that L2 teachers offer their boys a variety of activities so that at least some of them can be appropriate for boys. These days, L2 teachers all over the world offer a variety of lesson activities, such as group discussion, debate, essay writing, summary writing, jigsaw reading, retelling, role playing and so on. L2 teachers need to be aware that some of them might be so feminine that some boys think doing them is not cool or can lead to losing face in front of friends. In my view, an activity that requires boys to preform someone else in a play or drama might be one of such activities because it forces them to pretend to be another character, which makes it hard for them to remain cool. Also, an activity that requires boys to do the same thing over and over again might be another. Williams et al. (2003) claims that the boys thought that making effort at learning French (their L2) was not cool. An activity involving the repetition of the same tedious thing requires them to show their friends that they are working hard at something tedious. If there is a variety of activities offered to the boys, they find at least a few of them pleasant to do,

and if so, they are less likely to find themselves in a situation where they lose face in front of their friends.

Based on my own teaching experience, I also suggest that L2 teachers should offer their boys opportunities to meet a role model in L2 learning in person. A role model in L2 learning should be a proficient L2 speaker who has a positive attitude toward learning it. If they have an opportunity to meet such a model and think that they are cool, they are more likely to engage in a classroom activity. Ideally, the model should share the same gender and L1 with the boys and should be the one they respect and want to be like. If boys' L2 teacher can be a role model, that will be the best.

Kissau (2007) showed that strong gender stereotypes exist in Ontario not only among the adults but also among the boys, and that the parents, teachers and students in the study regarded learning French as being more feminine. This study suggests that males in the study associated French-speaking cultures or French language itself with women for some reason. As a result, the boys in the study reported receiving little encouragement from those around them. There are surely some social factors like this that can hamper boys' L2 learning. L2 teachers need to be aware that some languages are considered feminine by boys and adults, and that boys' L2 learning can be hampered by them.

More importantly, Kissau showed that the boys who intended to take French the following year had received extremely little encouragement from peers. This implies that if a boy intended to study French, he had to be much more determined than girls because there were few friends around them who push them to do so. Considering the importance of friendship for boys in this generation, the fact that they receive little peer encouragement can have a negative impact on their current and future study of French or their achievement of French in the long run.

Language is closely tied to the culture where it is spoken. As Dörnyei (2001) claims, if you learn French, you need to try to acquire the cultural elements or even identities of people who speak French language. Therefore, in case boys do not like cultural elements that the language brings, their willingness to start learning it can be reduced. L2 teachers need to be aware of the influence of L2 cultural elements on boys' L2 learning.

I suggest that L2 teachers offer their boys an opportunity to learn a variety of cultural elements of the L2, to talk about one of them, to learn its values, and to explore it in depth as a project learning based on their interests with the same-sex peers and, if possible, with their parents. If boys can share the value or enjoyment concerning learning those things with them, they can receive more encouragement to start learning L2 or to keep learning L2.

Lastly, how we should apply these findings into L2 teaching at KOSEN, which is a unique engineering college in Japan, and where boy occupancy is extremely high, will be discussed briefly here. In my view, while boys at KOSEN like to think logically and are good at it, some of them are too shy to express their ideas orally in English. One of the things English teachers at KOSEN have to do is create a classroom environment where failure is tolerated among boys while offering them as many opportunities to express their ideas to peers as possible. This will facilitate peer approval among boys in English lessons, and eventually English lessons will be a comfortable place for them to learn without worrying much about losing face in speaking English.

Also, since there are only a few girls in some classes at KOSEN, boys often need to practice speaking in English with other boys in English lessons. Some boys hardly ever have opportunities to listen to English spoken by girls and to read what girls write in English. Needless to say, girls can be a role model for boys' English learning. English teachers at KOSEN need to be aware of this and they should try to maximize opportunities for boys to learn from girls and to learn with girls.

#### 4. Conclusion

Reviewing the two studies on boys' L2 learning in two bilingual countries, Canada and Malta, the present study discussed interpersonal factors on secondary school boys' L2 learning in terms of encouragement and masculinity, and some implications for L2 teaching. Some L2 teachers might find it implausible that encouragement or masculinity could hamper boys' L2 learning, especially if they teach an influential language to students who are eager to learn it. However, to varying degrees, such interpersonal factors can hamper boys' L2 learning in any L2 teaching contexts and L2 teachers need to be aware of

it.

There are major limitations about the present study and two of them are picked up here. First, this study focused only on two factors to hamper boys' L2 learning, which are masculinity and encouragement. Since the issue of boys' L2 learning is such a huge and complex one, it should be examined from a broader point of view. Second, this study covered only two teaching contexts, and both of them were unique themselves. As a result, this study did not grasp the whole picture of the complicated topic of factors hampering boys' L2 learning. How boys view L2 learning and what social and interpersonal factors influence their views vary from context to context, or from person to person. What happens in Canada and Malta may not happen in other teaching contexts. Further research on factors to hamper boys' L2 learning needs to be conducted in some different contexts, especially in contexts where an L2 is perceived as a necessary and critical additional language and as a gateway to boys' better future.

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