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Gender and Linguistic Proficiency in Mother Tongue and a Foreign Language: A study on English proficiency of Sidamuafo speakers in Sidama Zone

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Abstract: Gender and linguistic proficiency in mother tongue and a foreign language was aimed at finding out whether there is a significant difference in linguistic proficiency in a first language and a foreign language, which has been formally studied for more than nine years on one hand, and if language achievement in L1 and L2 varies significantly based on gender. The study followed cross-sectional research design. It was non-experimental and descriptive, uncovering the performance of students in their mother tongue, Sidamuafo, and a foreign language, English. The methodology used was quantitative; tests which consisted of vocabulary, grammar, and completion of texts were given to students. Four schools and 200 participants were purposefully sampled from Hawassa town. The participants were initially purposefully chosen to balance gender, but test administration was made randomly to male and female students. To analyze the study, SPSS version 20 was used. The mean scores of the students were compared, and then independent T-test was run to find out if the mean difference is significant, finally effect size was calculated to check whether the mean difference measured with T-test has an effect in practical terms. The result of the study showed that males significantly performed higher than females in both Sidamuafo (L1) and English (L2) tests. Both males and females performed higher in their L1 (Sidamuafo) than in L2 (English). The overall statistics also showed that there is a positive skill transfer; the achievement in L1 helped the students to achieve high scores in L2 irrespective of gender difference.

Key Words: English, Gender, Language proficiency, Sidamuafo, Skill transfer

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I. INTRODUCTION

English, a foreign language, in Ethiopia is taught as a subject in lower primary (1-4), and is used as a medium of instruction and at the same times taught as a subject from grade five to university levels in most regional states of Ethiopia. Students use their mother tongue (MT) as a medium in lower primary, and the mother tongue is suspended in grade five and English becomes a medium of instruction in some zones and or regions, though MT continues as a subject in some regions and zones, such as the Sidama. Amharic is also taught as a subject from grade one to grade ten. Thus, schools in most part of Ethiopia, and the Sidama Zone in this particular case are characterized by multilingual education system whereby languages are interchangeably and/or concomitantly used as a medium and subject [1].

Mother tongues are introduced into education system assuming that students learn best with their first language also called mother tongue. Amharic is an important language which was national official language until it is recognized as only language of wider communication in the present government system. As a result, students have to study it to use it as a lingua franca. English is an international language used for international communication, diplomacy, and much of existing literature with bulk of knowledge is in English; so it has to be studied.

The extent a language can be learnt is affected by the medium, MT-Sidamuafo, second language-Amharic, and foreign language-English, it is used. Language learning and achievement are not only affected by medium, but also by other socio-cultural variables in which gender is one. Gender affects language use, learning and achievement due to biological, psychological, social and cultural differences between male and female [2].Biologically, it is found that there are slight differences between the two sexes in some of the body parts responsible for language. Degree of lateralization which affects brain in terms of language functions varies between males and females. Males have more left-hemisphere lateralization than females [3].

It is also found that cortical functions, larynx size vary between the two sexes. Socially, gender difference plays a role in social interactions; studies reported that females tend to be more sociable and cooperative than males [4]. Culturally, gender difference is constructed and shaped by the culture of particular social group. This in turn affects the way the two sexes behave, interact, and deal with realities in the real world where language learning is the part [5]; [6].

1.1 Statement of the problem

Language encodes and transmits social difference, gender is social phenomena; hence, there is no wonder that there is a differences between male and female language, provided also biological or physiological variations. The question; however, is whether the gender difference is equally reflected in second or foreign language learning and in first language or mother tongue acquisition. This article attempts to compare the English language proficiency of secondary high school students, specifically those in grade 10, whose first language is Sidamuafo to fill into the gap from the theoretical and applied perspectives.

1.2 Objective

The objective of this study is to find out if there is any significant variation between linguistic performance of male and female high school students whose first language is Sidamuafo in their English language skills. It has the following specific objectives:

1) to find out if there is significant difference between males and females in English (a foreign language) proficiency
2) to find out whether there is significant difference between males and females in first language proficiency
3) to uncover whether the proficiency differences/similarities of the two sexes in first and second language are correlated.

1.3 Significance

The study can be significant theoretically to uncover whether gender and language proficiency difference with regard to L1 and L2. It can help to make intervention on addressing the learning needs of both genders. It can also help to make further research on other variables that may cause achievement differences in addition to the language and gender since the differences are always there

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite biological, socio-cultural factors that determine language learning and achievement, previous studies show that gender difference influences students' interests, needs, and learning achievements [7]; [8]; [9]. For instance, gender difference plays role in language learning strategies. It was, for instance, reported that females tend to use "overall language learning strategies more than males" [2]. Other findings reported that males use more strategies than females; and still others reported that there is no significant difference between the two gender groups in using language learning strategies. The tendencies to language learning strategies in turn correlate with language proficiency [10]; [11]; [12]. This means that though it was reported that females are better in language acquisition than males in second as well as first language acquisition [13]; the findings are inconclusive. What seems evident is that the linguistic preference and frequency of use vary between males and females. For instance, [8] found that language use varies by gender at phonological, morphological and syntactic levels. In his study, women pronounced words more correctly and clearly than men. For instance, 62% of men pronounced -ing wrongly while only 28.9% of women pronounced the morpheme wrongly. She also found that women utter words in high tone than men. Vocabulary choice largely varied between men and women. Women used more adjectives and diminutives than men. Men used more swear words and cursing words than women. Women used first person plural pronouns while men used first person singular pronoun in giving suggestions to a single person. In syntax, male used more contractions and short forms than women, yet women spoke with ellipses while giving suggestions. It is also reported that women used more standard and formal language than men. As tests, here we are considering are formal aspects of language learning, it is expected such language use variations may be reflected in achievements of language test of both gender groups.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

*Research setting***:** schools in Sidama zone, as it is the case in most of the zones in the SNNPRS, are characterized by trilingual language use: Sidamuafo, Amharic and English. Sidamuafo as a medium has been introduced into school system in the last two decades. It is also actively spoken in the Zone by nearly all Sidama people. On the other hand, English, which is a foreign language, is used only in school settings as a subject in grades 1-4 and as a medium from grade five to university. The enrolment rate in Schools in the Sidama Zone has increased to a great extent in the last two decades. Girls have equal opportunities to attend schools as boys. Yet, it is expected that language proficiency between boys and girls in Sidama to be influenced by culture which

makes gender difference between male and female and at the same time imposes different social roles that shape the personality and psychological makeup both sex groups. Some of the social roles, such as assigning house chores to girls, girls should often be quiet and speak in low voice as in most Ethiopian culture can influence language learning that requires interaction and participation.

Participants: The participants will be grade 10 students of boys and girls. They will be chosen purposefully to represent the high schools in Hawassa and Hawassa Zurai districts maintaining gender equity. However, once school selection and gender balance is achieved, proficiency test will be given to randomly chosen students. As the number of female students in some schools is less than the male students, larger proportion will be given to schools where equally large numbers of girls are available in order to balance gender difference

Sample size: We have included 50 students per class from grade 10 in four different high schools. Though some school has more than one class in each grade, we have limited ourselves to the sample of 50 per grade in each high school; hence, our total sample is 200. This figure will be high as a representative of the whole population in the selected school though may not be so high compared to all high schools in Sidama.

Research Design: The research follows cross-sectional design. It was conducted at a time across different high schools in Hawassa town. It is descriptive for no experiment is conducted to predict proficiency. This is because first language acquisition takes place at early childhood despite the late mastery of specific socio-cultural knowledge, and thereby the language skills about them. On the other hand, much of second language is learnt at later stages and proficiency in it may be higher or lower based on the levels of intervention and exposure to the language. Our intention is not on improving language teaching method which is dependent variable, but to uncover if there is proficiency difference between different sexes (independent variables) with an existing opportunity to acquire L1 and learn a foreign language (dependent variables).

Research Methodology: The research methodology is quantitative; proficiency tests in Sidamuafo and English is given to the students, and their scores in the two languages are compared. The test consisted of 100 questions of diverse types, mainly grammar and writing. The English test was prepared by the researchers from the students' text books of grade 8-10. The Sidama test was typologically the same as the English test structurally and in the level of difficulty level. It was prepared and marked by Sidamuafo Native speakers who teach in highs school at grade 10. The teachers were trained as to how the test has to be constructed. In fact, the English test version was given to them so that consistency could be achieved. It is important to note that speaking and listening tests were not included in this study. The researcher felt that students would obviously perform better in L1 in speaking and listening, though there may still be performance difference with regard to gender.

Analysis method: The analysis is quantitative, computing the scores of the students in their language (L1) and English, a foreign Language (L2). To this end, SPSS version 20 is used. Mean and standard deviation of the scores, correlation between the variables and T-test are used to check whether gender and the language used affected the proficiency of the two sex groups. T-test was used to know how significant the differences between the groups' mean. We have also measured the effect size of the T-test to find out how practically it may affect the scores of the two sex groups.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Results

We have compared males and females scores in English (foreign language), then in Sidamuafo (MT), and finally their achievement in English compared to Sidamuafo. The presentation of the result also follows this order.

English Scores of both gender groups compared

To uncover whether there is a significant difference between males and females in their English proficiency test, we have compared the mean of the scores of the two sex groups. Table-1 below shows their results:

Group Statistics

	Gender of participant	*N*	*Mean*	*Std. Deviation*	*Std. Error Mean*
Score in English	Male	100	35.38	11.50	1.15
	Female	100	26.20	10.15	1.02

Table-1: Mean score of the student in English

The result shows that males on average scored higher, Mean=35.38, than females, Mean =26.20.

The achievement of both sex groups in the English proficiency test was generally low. Males relatively performed better in the test though they are not close to 50% an average score. Girls average, 26.50, imply that

they answered the questions only slightly higher than quarter, 25%, of the questions. The deviation of scores from the mean is nearly the same for males and females, 11.50 and 10.15, respectively. The standard error of mean is not so big and nearly similar for both gender groups.

In order to check whether the mean scores of males and females differ significantly, an independent sample T-test was run and the result is shown in Table-3:

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		***t-test for Equality of Means***						
		F	***Sig.***	***t***	***df***	***Sig. (2-tailed)***	***Mean Difference***	***Std. Error Difference***	***95% Confidence Interval of the Difference***	
									Lower	***Upper***
Score in English	Equal variances assumed	2.82	.095	5.98	198	.000	9.18	1.53	6.15	12.21
	Equal variances not assumed			5.98	194.99	.000	9.18	1.53	6.15	12.21

Table-2 Independent sample T-test result in English

From the results of independent sample t-test, we can conclude that there is significant difference in the English scores of males and females, as t (198) =5.98 at the DF=198, p =0.05 (two tailed) is greater than the critical value 1.97.

T-test that is statistical significant may not mean the effect is important in practical term (Field, 2009). A correlations statistics was run to check whether the scores of males and females were related and whether the effect size of correlation is low, mid or high. The output given in Table - 3 shows the correlation statistics:

Correlations

		Score in English	***Gender of participant***
Score in English	Pearson Correlation	1	**-.391****
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	200	200
Gender of participant	Pearson Correlation	**-.391****	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	200	200

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table-3: Correlation in English Test

The correlation value r= -0.391 is insignificant at p = 0.01. The correlation value implies that males and females belong to different groups not by chance rather due to the gender variable. The correlation is negative implying that the increase in scores of one group, here males, there is a decrease in the scores of the other group, here females. When we measure the effect size (also magnitude), r = -0.391 is medium (we follow the values ± 0.1- 0.29 to represent a small effect, ± 0.3-0.49, a medium effect and ± 0.5 and above a large effect (Field, 2009:170)).

The two-tailed probability for the males English score and Females English score is 0, tells us that there is no chance for the null hypothesis (there is no difference between scores of the two sex groups in their English scores) to be true; we accept 0 as statistically significant since it is less than $p < 0.05$.

Sidamuafo Scores of both groups compared

To find out whether there is significant difference between males and females in Sidamuafo (MT), we have computed mean, correlation, t-test and effect size, as we did for the English language proficiency test score. Below in Table-4 is the result of group statistics comparing their mean, standard deviation and standard error of the mean?

Group Statistics

	Gender of participant	*N*	*Mean*	*Std. Deviation*	*Std. Error Mean*
Score in Sidama	Male	100	67.52	12.94	1.29
	Female	100	58.24	14.11	1.41

Table-4: Group statistics in Sidamuafo

Mean scores of both males and females is very high in Sidamuafo (MT) compared to their mean scores in English. This testifies that learners are at east to study MT which in turn can imply that they are at east to study with MT.

When we compare the mean scores of males and females in their MT, males performance is higher, Mean = 67.52, than the females, Mean = 58.24. When we compare within group performance, the females scores deviates more from the mean, SD =14.11, than the males, SD = 12.94.

The results of independent sample t-test in Table -5, shows that there is significant difference in the Sidamuafo scores of the two gender groups, as t (198) =4.85 at DF=198, p=0.05 (two tailed) is greater than the critical value 1.972.

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		*t-test for Equality of Means*						
		F	*Sig.*	*t*	*df*	*Sig. (2-tailed)*	*Mean Difference*	*Std. Error Difference*	*95% Confidence Interval of the Difference*	
									Lower	*Upper*
Score in Sidama	Equal variances assumed	.671	.41	4.85	198	.000	9.28	1.91	5.50	13.05
	Equal variances not assumed			4.85	196.53	.000	9.28	1.91	5.50	13.05

Table-5: Independent Sample T-test result in Sidamuafo

A correlation statistics in Tabl-6 shows that the scores of the two gender groups in Sidamuafo is correlated, r= -.326** (at 0.01 level (2-tailed), with medium magnitude or effect size.

Correlations

		Gender of participant	*Score in Sidama*
Gender of participant	Pearson Correlation	1	-.326**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	200	200
Score in Sidama	Pearson Correlation	-.326**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	200	200

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table-6: Correlation statistics in Sidamuafo

The correlation is negative implies that the increase in the Sidamuafo scores of one group (Male students), there is decrease in the other (female students). This was, in fact, the case in the students' scores in English test.

The two-tailed probability statistics for both gender groups in Sidamuafo score is 0, which informs us that the hypothesis that there is no difference between scores of the two sex groups in Sidamuafo scores cannot be accepted; 0 is statistically significant since it is less than $p < 0.05$.

Overall English and Sidamuafo Scores of the Students

This section was required not to compare difference in gender, but achievement differences in L1 (Sidamuafo and L2 (English). The overall mean score of the students in English was 30.79 with SD of 11.76, and their overall score in Sidamuafo was 62.88 with SD of 14.28. Thus, students scored more than average mean 50 in their L1 (Sidamuafo) while the scored was far less than average, only 30.79 in English.

A correlation statistics was run to check if the increase or decrease in one of the test increases or decreases in the other test. Table -7 shows the result:

Correlations

		Score in English	*Score in Sidama*
Score in English	Pearson Correlation	1	.592**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	200	200
Score in Sidama	Pearson Correlation	.592**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	200	200

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table-7: correlation statistics in overall test of both groups

The correlation (r) = .592** is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed). The magnitude is high since it is greater than 0.5. The correlation is positive implies that when there is increase in the scores of L1, there is also increase in their scores of L2 and vice versa, which in turn shows positive skills transfer. It is worth to note that this is true when all the learners, males and females, taken as aggregates. We have already seen that such positive skill transfer was witnessed when the achievement was computed with gender difference.

4.2 Discussion

The present study confirms that there is a difference between males and females score [15]. However, the claim by some scholars that females are better than males in language performance [13] & [2] is not supported in this study. To the contrary, males performed better than females both in L1 and L2 tests. This means that language achievement may not be different from the achievement in other subjects. We opt for this because girls in Ethiopia generally are constrained by number of socio-cultural factors. Socially, they are less interactive, at least in Sidama, for the culture approves of their silence and calmness. They are also overburdened with house chores unlike most males; hence, have less time for study and practice at home after classes are over. So, instead of biological factor, the socially constructed culture must have played much role for performance differences between males and females, being other social variables kept constant.

There is every reason as to why the students performed higher in their MT than in English. In studying L1 and taking tests in it, students are less impeded by vocabulary deficiency; hence, they can better comprehend meaning. To the contrary, studying and taking test with English is quite different scenario. Because English is a foreign language, there is lexical shortage; hence learner's comprehension is less. The grammar of English as well is different compared to their L1 to which they are exposed to in their early childhood.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Based on the results discussed above, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. There is significant difference in the scores of males and females in English and Sidamuafo; hence, the null hypothesis is rejected.
2. The males' score in both English and Sidamuafo tests is higher than the females'.
3. Both males and females performed higher in their L1 (Sidamuafo) than in L2 (English).

5.2 Recommendations

We suggest that theoretically gender and language achievement should be studied in a socio-culturally specific situation rather than in a global perspective. This is because the way gender is socially constructed, and different socio-cultural roles are imposed by both gender groups (not including trans-gender which we did not come across in our case) vary from culture to culture.

In Ethiopian context in general and Sidama in particular, girls need additional academic support to catch up their fellow male classmates. This could be done through tutorials, special induction sessions, an organized language clubs in which girls can have an opportunity to practice their language, and online self-study materials, probably blended with classroom instruction, in the form of texts as well as audio-video lessons.

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