INVESTIGATING EFL STUDENTS LINGUISTIC PLURAL: THE CASE STUDY OF ZAKHO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

INVESTIGACIÓN DE CARACTERÍSTICAS LINGÜÍSTICAS DE LOS ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS DE EFL EN ZAKHO


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Resumen
Este estudio intenta investigar las características lingüísticas de los estudiantes universitarios de EFL. Se administró un cuestionario a una muestra seleccionada al azar de 95 estudiantes de 2º y 2º de EFL en el Departamento de Lengua Inglesa, Facultad de Humanidades, Universidad de Zakho, Región del Kurdistán, Iraq, durante el segundo trimestre del año académico 2016-2017. Los datos cuantitativos y cualitativos recolectados a través del cuestionario revelan que (1) los estudiantes de la muestra tienen características lingüísticas efectivas mientras aprenden EFL, y (2) no hay diferencias estadísticamente significativas entre los estudiantes masculinos y femeninos en función del género en general.
Palabras clave: inglés como lengua extranjera, características lingüísticas, aprendices de idiomas

Abstract
This study attempts to investigate the linguistic characteristics of EFL university students. A questionnaire has been administered to a randomly selected sample of 95 EFL 2nd year and 3rd students at the Dept. of English Language, College of Humanities, University of Zakho, Kurdistan Region, Iraq during the second term of the academic year 2016-2017. The qualitative and qualitative data collected by means of the questionnaire reveal that (1) students in the sample have effective linguistic characteristics while learning EFL, and (2) there is no statistically significant differences between the male and female students on the basis of gender in general.
Keywords: English as a foreign language, Linguistic characteristics, Language learners.

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INTRODUCTION

The various theories and models of language acquisition attempt to find out the way learners in formal settings and people in the local community learn or acquire a language (Collier & Thomas, 1988). They further try to prove second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) learners' common characteristics. Undoubtedly, the process of learning an FL is always laden with the most influencing factor, viz. learners' individual differences represented, in the main, by the speed and the degree of success and achievement in learning an FL. The latter statement applies to both learning inside the classroom and acquisition in outside community as almost every one can acquire his first language/mother language unconsciously and naturally (Dörnyei, 2014). It is the later stage of learning a new language, mostly in a formal setting, that the differences and variations among learners in terms of the degree of success in acquiring the L2/FL become eminent.

It is worthy to note that the provision of the same learning environment or classroom context never eliminates the fact that some learners would achieve rapid and noticeable success in comparison to their L2ow-learning counterparts whose learning would not go beyond limited proficiency though some of them spend years to learn the new language. Such an argument entails a number of questions with regard to the noticeable success by some learners (Naiman, Frohlich, & Stern, 1978). Are there any specific characteristics that make one learner more brilliant and successful than another? A positive answer to the preceding question should highlight and identify such characteristics.

The notion of learner characteristics has been accounted for in the processes and sciences of learning, awareness and cognition to specify (a target group of) some learners and describe their educational/academic features that might have a direct or indirect impact on how and what they learn (Butler & Stevens, 1997). This is so since learners' characteristics have been crucial in instructional design. Put it differently, knowing learner characteristics helps in designing more effective instructions and more powerful, motivating and improved instructional materials for a target group of learners. Such characteristics vary in being educational/academic or cognitive. To be more specific, educational characteristics account for an individual learner's education, educational type, previous knowledge and intelligence, while cognitive characteristics include intellectual skills, thoughts, problem solving, memorization and mental procedures.

It is noteworthy that noticeable differences can be found between the characteristics of learners in terms of belonging to different groups, viz. kid, high school student, university student, professionals, adults, and younger and/or older people. Such differences are reflected in the aforementioned groups' motivation, previous knowledge, level of expertise, time allocated for study, and abilities with regard to learners' aptitude and can have a direct impact on the structure of the instruction design.

1.1 Significance of the Study

As for the significance of the current study, it is worthy to note that the value of understanding EFL learners' characteristics is immeasurable. Such characteristics can impact a variety of aspects in the classroom represented by the teaching/learning environment, learners' interaction, engagement in the ongoing activities and collaboration, and teacher's behavior and adoption of pedagogical approaches and techniques. Hence, the present research is expected to be of value to all those involved in the process of teaching EFL at all educational levels, namely students, teachers and teaching materials designers. As for students, they can make use of the study by familiarizing themselves with the details on learners' characteristics so as to know their effectiveness in the domain of education at large and in learning EFL in particular. Students can also benefit from the experimental part of the present research as the results will highlight the most prevalent characteristics of EFL university students.

1.2 Study Objectives

The present study is set to investigate EFL university learners' linguistic characteristics. It further aims at specifying the role that learners' gender plays by highlighting their characteristics, that male and/or female learners have while learning EFL. The study also seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the linguistic characteristics of Kurdish EFL students?

2. Are there significant differences between Kurdish male and female EFL students in terms of Linguistic Characteristics?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foreign language learners vary in their possession of the effective linguistic characteristics that can bring about efficient FL learning (Stern, Stern, Tarone, Stern, & Yule, 1983). Variation is evident from both the number of these characteristics and the extent of their availability in learners. A number of researchers have investigated FL leraners' linguistic characteristics and outlined that there is a variety of such which can bring about successful FLL within the classroom setting. For instance, in an early study conducted by Sapon and Carroll (1958), they identified a number of learner abilities that would create language aptitude in learning an FL and as follows:

"The ability to identify and memorize new words.
The ability to understand the function of particular words in sentences.
The ability to figure out grammatical rules from language samples.
Memory for new words." (Sapon & Carroll, 1958, p. 79)

Additionally, the previous studies have investigated the relationship between aptitude and success in FL learning and found out that a strong relationship existed

in this respect (Hurd & Murphy, 2005). Most of the studies also outlined that FL learners looked for every opportunity to use the FL inside and outside the classroom. More specifically, the learners were looking for the places where they could meet English native speakers so as to initiate conversation with them and practice English as much as they could; a procedure that helped them to get feedback from the native speakers especially in terms of the style of speaking (Sapon & Carroll, 1958). Further findings of the relevant research also indicated that FL learners faced difficulties in managing effective communication due to their limited knowledge of the FL words and structures. In this respect, Orwig (1999) suggests a number of techniques that language learners adopt:

Use all your resources to communicate, coin words to help communicate, but be careful, rehearse what you want to say ahead of time, if you do not know a word, circumlocute, learn responses to keep the conversation going, use memorized phrases at the beginning to get people to talk to you, check out the meaning of words, before you add them to your active vocabulary, and give and get feedback to check comprehension (Orwig, 1999, p. 304).

The same author further suggests that FL learners can handle the problems they encounter by taking systematic and well-organized notes while the teacher is delivering the lecture since such notes have been proved to be effective and useful in language learning (Shirvani et al, 2015).

FL learners' aptitude can also be represented by a bunch of classroom activities or behaviors. For instance, not all learners are willing to take part in classroom activities due to the comments made by their classmates on the mistakes committed. Added to that, FL learners show different levels attention to the FL skills. While all language skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing are accounted for almost equally, special attention is given to the pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary of the FL as most learners find it a challenging learning task due to the complexities of the structures of the language (Pinker & Prince, 1994). It is worthy to note that learners can resort to different techniques for the sake of creating opportunities to practice listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Learners are said to face no difficulty in this respect as they enjoy participating in such activities and they have the required skills to practice it whenever there is an opportunity (SOLEYMANI et al, 2014).

FL learners' ability to process language meaningfully, i.e. processing comprehensible input firms a further linguistic characteristic of such learners. Orwig (1999. P. 307) points out that "learners need to choose activities that cause them to actually process language meaningfully" especially in case "there is a new piece of information" with focus of attention on a particular aim and on the choice and use of a variety of activities and approaches that make the fulfillment of such an aim quite feasible.

Finally, learner's attention when someone is speaking English, enrichment of vocabularies by looking at the derivations (words family) and not just the core word only, choice of learning situations that are conducive to learning and selection of good language role models are all linguistic (educational) characteristics that have to be heavily heeded in the process of FLL so as to bring about the hoped-for objectives.

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

A sample of 96 2nd and 3rdyear EFL students, 37 male (38.5 %) and 59 (61.4 %) female, were, randomly selected from among a population representing the 4 study stages at the Dept. of English language, University of Zakho, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The design of the present study is of quantitative nature, i.e. inferential and descriptive. Hence, the only measuring instrument was an adapted questionnaire. The participants were asked to be attentive and honestly answer the items of the questionnaire. They were required to give their responses to a set of items concerning their linguistic characteristics. The demographic profile with focus on gender was a further point that participants were asked to heed.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

A questionnaire for investigating "linguistic characteristics" was the only instrument used to collect the data for the current study. Based on the researchers' experience and to bring about the aims of the research, some a 12-item questionnaire was constructed to address the linguistic characteristics of FLLs. Finally, the participants were supposed to give responses according to Likert's 5-point scale that rangers from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

To ensure the validity of the research instrument, i.e. the questionnaire, it was given in the first place to a panel of juries, of the teaching faculty of six professors specialized in psychology and teaching EFL. Their suggestions in terms of adding, deleting or modifying the items of the questionnaire were taken into account and hence the questionnaire was approved for administration. To prove the reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted on a randomly selected sample of 25 students. The collected data were analyzed by using Social Science Program (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 20.0. The reliability coefficient test indicated a Cronbach Alpha value of 0.963 which indicated that the questionnaire was highly reliable and that the items were absolutely suitable to bring about the aims of the study (Kosko & Singh, 2019).

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data were collected by means of the adapted questionnaire which was administered to a randomly selected sample of 96 male and female sophomore EFL students at the Dept. of English Language, University of Zakho. SPSS program was used to analyze the data quantitatively aiming so as to get accurate answers for the two research questions. Besides, the T-test was applied to find out if there were any statistically significant differences between the linguistic characteristics of the male and female participants.

DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the findings of the statistical analysis of the data obtained by means of the questionnaire and the interview. It paves the way to the tackling of the practical part of the current study. Just like any quantitative research study that strongly recommends the utilization and application of certain patterns to bring about the intended set aims, it is worthy to note that that the required data have been obtained and analyzed by means of the research tools and the statistical means.

Item 1: I look for every opportunity to use English inside and outside classroom.
Two types of language learning contexts, namely informal language acquisition context and formal language learning context usually exist. The former refers to any situation, other than the classroom setting, that provides the FL learner with an opportunity to practice and use the language. The latter, i.e. the formal language learning situation refers to the classroom setting where the prescribed teaching materials and activities are put into practice under the FL teacher's guidance. This item has been set to identify the level of respondents' looking for the appropriate situations, whether inside or outside the classroom, to improve and develop their performance of the different language skills. Analysis of the responses to this item outlines a mean score (M=3.7474) and a standard deviation value (SD=1.0814) which indicate that the majority of the respondents look for any opportunity to use English in every situation and context.

Item 2: I pinpoint problems in learning and try to find effective solutions.
This item outlines learners' self-assessment and skill identification. Pinpointing and figuring out serious problems while learning another language, and looking for the effective solutions are undoubtedly viewed as effective linguistic skills. As such, this item aims at EFL learners' identification of the learning problems and the provision of the effective solutions. Analysis of the data collected on this item indicates that the respondents, based on the mean score (M=3.7474) and the standard deviation value (SD=1.0311) of the responses, can identify the learning problems and simultaneously look for the effective solutions.

Item 3: I keep on taking notes in a well-organized manner.
Note-taking in an organized and beneficial manner forms one of the demanding skills in the context of FL learning and hence a characteristic of good language learners. Such notes help learners to cope with the process of FL learning and teaching as they help learners to retrieve these notes when required. This item has been set within the questionnaire to identify the frequency and percentage of respondents who put down notes and later retrieve them when required. The mean score (M=3.5053) and standard deviation value (SD=1.1380) value obtained indicate that the overwhelming majority of the respondents put down notes for later use when required.

Item 4: I enjoy participating in classroom activities.
Participation in the FL activities is varied from one learner to another. While some FL learners favour silence over participation and for various reasons, others find in participation something enjoyable that can help them be active learners and develop their different FL skills. The mean score (M=3.8737) and the standard deviation value (SD=1.2311) obtained from the analysis of the data pertinent to this item, indicate that the majority of the respondents are interested in participating in the FL classroom activities.

Item 5: I pay special attention to the pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary of English.
Generally speaking, mastering an FL implies acquiring a variety of skills. Competent learners usually heed all the aspects of the new language they are learning. In other words, they do not limit the efforts exerted and the time spent to a certain aspect, for instance grammar, at the expense of phonetics or vocabulary. Accordingly, this item has been set in the questionnaire to probe the frequency and percentage of the respondent in terms of their attendance to the three levels of language, namely grammar, phonetics and vocabulary. Analysis of the collected data reveals that the respondents' mean score is (M=3.9474) and the standard deviation value is (SD=1.1239); both of which indicate that most respondents simultaneously pay attention to the three levels of language.

Item 6: I try to increase the opportunities to practice listening, speaking, reading and writing.
Learning an FL through mere instruction within the classroom boundaries does not lead to promising outcomes. Hence, learners need to invest every opportunity, inside and outside the classroom, to practice the language. The analysis of the data collected on this item has come out with a mean score (M=4.0947) and a standard deviation value (SD=1.0922), which indicate that a high frequency and percentage of respondents attempt to increase the opportunities to practice the listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills both inside and outside the classroom.

Item 7: I focus on choosing the appropriate activities as I am already familiar with the relevant ideas.
A variety of language activities are included in the process of FL learning. Learners usually face much difficulty on dealing with unfamiliar activities or phenomena that might exist in the FL but not in the learners' native language. As such, learners often choose the activities that they feel at ease when engaged in carrying them out, the mean score (M=3.5474) and the standard deviation value (SD= 1.0495) obtained; both of which indicate that the majority of the respondents choose activities based on ideas they already possess.

Item 8: In addition to my FL classes, I look for further activities to learn and use the language.
Competent FL learners of good educational and linguistic abilities usually practice activities both inside and outside the classroom compared to their counterparts who lack such abilities and are duly not interested in doing any additional activities. They think that such abilities will qualify and help them plan for more beneficial practices and activities. Data analysis shows that most respondents, in the light of the mean score (M=3.7474) and the standard deviation value (SD=0.9449), plan for additional activities so as to learn and use English.

Item 9: I pay much attention when someone is speaking English.
Paying attention means focus on and precise analysis of the way that language works in terms of speaking and oral production. This item has been set to figure out the frequency and percentage of the respondents who pay attention to someone speaking English. The mean score (M=4.1263), and the standard deviation value (SD=1.0742) indicate that most respondents do pay attention when someone is speaking English.

Item 10: I enrich my vocabulary by looking at the derivations (words family) rather than the core words only.
Vocabulary learning forms a crucial part of the process of FL learning. This is so as three language skills, namely speaking, reading and writing, out of four have vocabulary specific to them. Based on this, EFL learners endeavor to enrich their vocabulary by means of a variety of strategies of which derivation forms a part and parcel. Analysis of the data collected on this item entails a mean score (M=3.5053) and a standard deviation value (SD=1.0092); both of which indicate that the majority of the respondents adopt derivation as a strategy to enrich their English vocabulary.

Item 11: I choose learning situations that fit my learning style.
Learning situations vary in terms of effectiveness and outcomes. As there are learning situations that can maximize the chances to learn, there are also some situations that are of a lesser degree of effectiveness. Also, learners' awareness of their language learning styles helps them to choose the most effective learning

situations in spite of the fact that all situations and activities play a role in language learning in one way or another. This item has been set in the questionnaire to identify the frequency and percentage of the respondents in terms of their choice of the effective learning situations and activities. The mean score (M=3.8842) and the standard deviation value (SD=0.9093) indicate that all the respondents choose and prefer learning situations that fit their learning styles.

Item 12: I look for good language role models.
Language role models form a paramount component of learning at large and FL learning in particular. This is so because good language role models can help in better development and learning of the new language as they are expected to provide learners with the opportunity to practice English inside and outside the classroom. The positive responses to this item enhanced by the mean score (M=4.2421) and the standard deviation value, SD=0.8214) reveal that a very high frequency and duly percentage of the respondents look for good language role models.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Research Question 1: What are the linguistic characteristics of Kurdish learners of EFL?
Concerning the above stated question which aims to investigate the linguistic characteristics of Kurdish EFL learners, it was found out that they, i.e. learners had positive educational characteristics. They were attentive, enthusiastic to use English inside and outside the classroom and aware to identify learning problems and their effective solution. They were also observed to take notes in a well-organized manner, and create opportunities to practice the four language skills inside and outside the classroom. Added to that, they had the four components of language aptitude, viz. phonemic coding ability, grammatical sensitivity, inductive language learning ability, and associative memory. These findings go in line with the model of language components proposed by Carroll (1957) who stated later in a publication in 1981 that “an individual’s initial state of readiness and capacity for learning a foreign language, and probable facility in doing so given the presence of motivation and opportunity” (as cited in Dörnyei, 2014, p. 69).

It is worthy to mention that high language aptitude plays a pivotal role in the success of the process of FLL; a point that was approved by the current study so as to confirm the findings of two previous studies carried out by Sapon and Carroll (1958) and later by Orwig (1999) who concluded that one learner was more successful than another due to the availability of a set of educational qualifications. To bring about such qualifications, stated that;

> “a good language learner can use all resources to communicate, coin words to help communicate, but be careful, rehearse what you want to say ahead of time, if you do not know a word, circumlocute, learn

> responses to keep the conversation going, use memorized phrases at the beginning to get people to talk to you, check out the meaning of words, before you add them to your active vocabulary, and give and get feedback to check comprehension" (Orwig, 1999, p. 304).

Thus, language learners by having such characteristics are considered good language learners in light of the results arrived at.

Research Question 2: Are there differences between Kurdish male and female EFL students in terms of their Linguistic Characteristics?

With regard to the research question that probes the availability of differences, if any, between Kurdish male and female EFL students in terms of their linguistic characteristics, the final findings remarked a noticeable similarity between the two genders as far as their frequencies of most of the questionnaire items are concerned. This is on one hand. On the other hand, as Table 1 demonstrates, the t-test analysis highlighted significant differences between the two genders as far as their responses to a number of items of the questionnaire are concerned

Table 1. The Differences between the Characteristics of Kurdish EFL University Students According to Gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Item 6	Male	47	2.6170	1.07447	.004
	Female	48	3.3125	1.18781	
Item 7	Male	47	3.4043	1.13558	.042
	Female	48	2.8958	1.25883	
Item 8	Male	47	3.5957	1.13558	.019
	Female	48	3.0417	1.12908	
Item 9	Male	47	4.0213	.87201	.009
	Female	48	4.4583	.71335	

Source: Authors (2019)

CONCLUSIONS

As it has been reported in the literature, various factors such as gender, years of study, specialization, learning environment and the surrounding community influence the learning process. The current study aimed at investigating Kurdish EFL University students' linguistic characteristics in EFL. As such, theoretically speaking, the present study has tackled the concept of the effect of linguistic characteristic as a key factor in the process of FL learning.

Practically speaking, it was hypothesized that there was not a significant difference of linguistic characteristics in terms of gender variable. The results showed that there is statically significant difference only in some items illustrated in the table above.

Concerning the educational or linguistic characteristics, Kurdish EFL students were found to be attentive, enthusiastic to use English inside and outside the classroom, looking for good language role models, identifying learning problems and finding effective solutions, taking notes in a well-organized manner, and creating opportunities to practice the four language skills inside and outside the classroom.

It is believed that the findings of the current study have implications for different parties represented by curriculum designers, education policy-makers in Kurdistan region of Iraq, FL/SL learners, and researchers. For instance, a perception has been provided regarding the way Kurdish EFL learners comprehend the varied aspects of the process of learning EFL. Added to that, this study puts forward some new valuable perceptive insights into Kurdsih EFL students' linguistic characteristics, the educational system policy, and their goals behind learning the language. Finally, the findings of the present study are expected to add to a growing body of literature on the linguistic characteristics of EFL learners.

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