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Analyzing the Gender Gap in Second Language Acquisition: A New ESL Curriculum for Latina
English Learners

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Chancellor's Honors Program Thesis

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Abstract:

According to the 2013 United States Census, 25% of men working in the service industry have limited English proficiency (LEP), whereas 45% of women have LEP. This unequal distribution of linguistic capabilities insinuates a gap in the rates of Second Language Acquisition between male and female English learners in the United States. To connect this issue to the Latinx community specifically, over half of the LEP population is Latinx (63%). The opportunities that women have to pursue SLA through English as a Second Language (ESL) classes are limited for a variety of social and cultural factors; however, when this disparity is considered within the context of the Latinx community, the effect of social and cultural factors are increased due to traditional gender roles. Because this gender gap in SLA exists, specifically within the Latinx community, this project investigates the gender gap in SLA among Latina immigrants through the creation of a new ESL curriculum in which English-learning students can experience more proportional representation and acquire necessary skill sets by addressing accessibility and language-based needs through relevant educational resources, as well as technological literacy through digital implementations.

Introduction:

When beginning the initial research to eventually create a new ESL curriculum, a few specific aspects must be considered: the teacher's role, demographic effects of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and the individual perception of opportunities. According to "Teacher-student interactions in the ESL classroom: an investigation of three-part exchanges, teacher feedback, and the role of gender" by Marguerite Sibley, three part exchanges are defined as a common interaction within the classroom; they begin with a request from a teacher, an answer from a

student, and an evaluation by the teacher. Ultimately, the author concludes through empirical research that students are more likely to participate in open-ended questions, rather than responding to situations in which they are individually called on (Sibley 77). The study also concludes that teachers most often call on students individually, rather than calling for volunteers to answer questions. In regards to gender, female students are called on more than males, and males volunteered to answer questions almost twice as much as women did; ultimately, this led to the teacher's decision to individually target students with lower participation to give all an equal chance at participation (Sibley 103). Women were found to participate significantly less than men when considering participation to include commentary and voluntary answers.

To continue investigating the issue of gender in the ESL classroom within the context of the teacher's role, the article "Gender differences and equal opportunities in the ESL classroom" by Ali Sheshadeh explores the difference in conversational learning as it affects men in women. While men have a tendency to control conversations in a classroom, specifically within the context of learning another language, Sheshadeh proves that with good methodology and an engaging curriculum, equal opportunities in the ESL classroom can be achieved.

As it has been previously mentioned, gender and SLA are closely related in terms of the teacher's involvement in the classroom. However, when gender is considered within the context of ethnicity as well, providing an intersectional approach, the complexity of the issues surrounding SLA grows exponentially more complicated. First and foremost the distinction between sex and gender as it applies to SLA must be defined so as to correctly interpret the demographic aspects of the research being done. According to "Linking Gender and Second Language Education: A Database" by Rosa María Jiménez Catalán, sex and gender are

considered as individual learning factors, rather than the same learning factor. Sex is a biological trait, whereas gender is a self-identified trait (Jiménez Catalán 209). While they are different in terms of definition, they can both explain possible cognitive and strategic differences when teaching males and females, separately or together. As a result of this, social discrimination patterns affect the potential for equality within the educational context (Jiménez Catalán 211). Additionally, according to “Gender, Age and Second Language Acquisition” by Hiba Ghabra, differentiation between sex and gender contributes to the objective understanding of how gender affects SLA through a variety of different models. The Deficit Model demonstrates that women are seen as disadvantaged communicators, while the Cultural Difference Model addresses the different ways in which girls and boys are socialized indicates that socialization differences ultimately impact the understanding of L2. The Dominance Model, which addresses the inherent power men have over women socially indicates an inherent disadvantage for women in the context of SLA due to their lack of authority (Ghabra 5). According to both Jiménez Catalán and Ghabra, it is incredibly important to consider gender within an SLA classroom context because gendered education is a multifaceted issue with a variety of educational repercussions.

In terms of gender without the comparison to sex in regard to SLA, “Current Perspectives on the Role of Gender in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Research” by Karen Feery, gender contributes to a comprehensive social identity that affects a person’s ability to learn another language. The context in which a specific gender learns a language has a tremendous amount of influence on the efficacy in which they learn a language (Feery 35). When females are subject to an unideal learning environment, specifically one in which they may be subject to harassment or flirtatious distraction, the facets in which they learn the language differ. For example, a female

who is sexually harassed at class learns the second language (L2), however, she may find refuge in reading, rather than conversation because the nature of learning a language through reading indicates a lesser chance of male interaction.

After investigating the various ways in which gender and SLA are intertwined, demonstrating an obvious gender gap through statistical, psychological and sociolinguistic research, it is necessary to observe how this gender gap operates within the context of real-world situations. According to “The Gender Gap in Second Language Acquisition: Gender Differences in the Acquisition of Dutch among Immigrants from 88 Countries with 49 Mother Tongues” by Frans W. P. van der Slik et. al., in the acquisition of 88 mother tongues throughout the Netherlands, females outperform males. This distinction does carry over into the acquisition of Dutch in terms of speaking and writing proficiency. Through the Matthew effect, it is seen that other factors, such as education and age, contribute positively to the additional distinction between male and female SLA (van der Slik et. al). Overall, it is concluded that females generally benefit more from education than males because the rates in which women are more proficient in the L2 were increased when those women were educated for significant lengths of time.

Within the context of the United States, statistical research proves the gender gap in SLA, as well as an ethnic gap in SLA. According to the 2013 Census, Limited English Proficiency (LEP) statistics are highest in regards to the age group 18-64, and Latinx immigrants make up 63% of the LEP population. In relation to the service occupation, the occupation with the highest percentage of LEP workers, 45% of women within the field are LEP, while only 25% of men are LEP. This disparity also carries over into the fields of sales and office occupations. Through the

2013 Census, it is obvious that a gender gap and ethnic gap is present within the context of SLA in the United States.

With the statistical, psychological and sociological research discussed, it is important to gather secondary research to gain a better perspective into the perception of opportunities among the Latina community in order to better address their needs in an ESL curriculum.

“Intergenerational Trajectories and Sociopolitical Context: Latina Immigrants in Adult ESL” by Julia Menard-Warwick is an ethnographic study that explores the experience of two adult Latina English learners from Central America in the San Francisco Bay Area. Brenda, a woman from Nicaragua reported her primary education was interrupted by social pressures to marry and have children before coming to the U.S. When she arrived in the U.S., she found motherhood to be a hindrance on her opportunities, but didn’t allow it to stop her as she had plans to own her own business and attend college (Menard-Warwick 173). Serafina, a Guatemalan immigrant, also experienced educational hardships in her primary education in Guatemala due to a lack of desire for school (Menard-Warwick 175). Although her brother was highly educated, Serafina found one of her largest hindrances to be her pre-existing bilingual background with Quiche. After moving to the U.S., she found motherhood and a demanding work schedule to hinder her opportunities to learn English. Menard-Warwick continues her exploration of perception in “I Always Had the Desire to Progress a Little”: Gendered Narratives of Immigrant Language Learners’. In this work, there is a consistent theme of educational obstacles faced by females before they enter ESL programs. These educational obstacles often come as a result of marriage or children, consequentially setting the tone for the educational mindset throughout the course of the L2 acquisition. To avoid education while still making a living, women often find refuge in

the service industry, specifically as maids in the U.S. In addition to educational obstacles faced by Latina women learning English, marriages often hinder their opportunities because of male skepticism (Menard-Warwick 300). Oftentimes, males will limit their partner's educational opportunities as a form of control.

These studies illustrate the important aspects and considerations that should be advised when creating a new ESL curriculum. Additionally, they address demographic differences, such as age, gender and country of origin, that affect English learners, as well as their perceptions of their own opportunities. Their experiences are supported and hindered by a variety of predominantly social factors, however, the female resilience to continue education despite hardships remains. To see how these findings correspond within the Knoxville community, additional perceptual research in East Tennessee among the Latinx population is necessary to better gauge the linguistic needs and social factors that affect students at Centro Hispano of East Tennessee.

Methods:

The purpose of this study was to investigate the gender gap in Second Language Acquisition among Latina immigrant English learners in the United States through a short survey, ultimately creating a new digital curriculum that better addresses their linguistic needs. The study population was both male and female Latin American English learners at the local, educational non-profit Centro Hispano of East Tennessee during the regular ESL class hours, and there were 50 participants total. The participants who were compliant with the informed consent statement completed a short, 15-question anonymous survey in which they provided information about their personal perceptions of their linguistic opportunities and capabilities based on

specific demographic factors, such as age, country of origin and gender. Additionally, the survey asked about missing elements from the current curriculum they use. The questions were worded in both short answer and multiple choice formats to ensure a variety of data. It took approximately 5-15 minutes to complete.

The collection of this data was analyzed in an abstract manner to enhance the applicability and universality of an ESL curriculum to address the gender gap in Second Language Acquisition through ESL classes. Through gathering data on the perception of Latinx English learners in relation to their own opportunities and capabilities, curriculum customization is facilitated.

1. How old are you?

2. Where are you from?

3. Are you male, female, non-gender conforming or prefer not to say?

4. My gender has affected my education.

Yes _____ No _____ Prefer not to say _____

5. My gender has affected my opportunities to learn English.

Yes _____ No _____ Prefer not to say _____

6. My experiences with ESL classes are different than those of the opposite gender.

Yes _____ No _____ Prefer not to say _____

7. I have more opportunities to learn English than the opposite sex.

Yes _____ No _____ Prefer not to say _____

8. Because I am Latinx, my opportunities to learn English are different than those of other people. Why?

Yes _____ No _____ Prefer not to say _____

Why? 1 or more sentences.

9. The curriculums that exist are perfect for my linguistic necessities.

Yes _____ No _____ Prefer not to say _____

10. There are things that the curriculum doesn't mention that I would like to learn.

Yes _____ No _____ Prefer not to say _____

What are they? 1+ topics I would like to learn.

11. The opportunities in the United States to learn English are better than those that are in my country.

Yes _____ No _____ Prefer not to say _____

12. General comments:

Fig. 1. Survey Questions

Results:

The results from the survey were varied in nature, however a few prominent trends presented themselves that were incredibly useful within the context of ESL curriculum creation. In the first half of the survey comprised of demographic information, it was presented that the majority of ESL students at Centro Hispano are from Mexico (50%), with Colombia (14%), Venezuela (14%) and Guatemala (10%) not far behind. 44% of the survey participants identified

as female, 28% identified as male, and 28% preferred not to disclose their gender. The age range was between the ages of 19 years old and 76 years old, therefore indicating a diverse generational representation.

After the demographic information was disclosed in a way so as to maintain anonymity, questions were asked to build upon the perceptions of demographic factors' effects in regard to ESL education. 92% of participants claimed that their gender has not affected their education, while 6% said that their gender has affected their education. Furthermore, 94% of people claimed that gender had no impact on their opportunities to learn English. These results were quite surprising to contrast the findings of Julia Menard-Warwick; however, the survey results were bound to include more variety because they included a wide array of participants, whereas Menard-Warwick's work was concentrated on the individual narratives of women from specific countries. Also, because my study included the participation of both men and women, the findings were more diverse and representative of the Latinx population in East Tennessee, rather than a Latina perspective in California.

When students were asked about the perception of their opportunities in regard to their identities as Latinx people, the results remained relatively static. Students insisted that their opportunities were equal to those of other English learners in the United States, focusing on the fact that the opportunities to learn English and general education in the United States are superior to the opportunities in their country of origin. If students did acknowledge a difference in their opportunities due to their identity as a Latinx person, the findings were that speakers of indigenous Latin American languages encounter more difficulties as Latinx people learning English. This concept was one of the most important findings throughout the survey because it

emphasized the importance of considering bilingual and multilingual people as parts of the Latinx narrative regarding SLA.

After addressing the demographic concerns, the survey transitioned into a section about the perception of currently implemented ESL curriculums. When asked if the current ESL curriculum at Centro Hispano, the Cambridge ESL curriculum, addressed all of the linguistic needs of its students, 60% of participants responded “yes”, while 28% of participants responded “no”. When prompted to elaborate on topics that the current curriculum does not adequately address, participants overwhelmingly responded with a desire to learn more pronunciation and lifestyle-centric vocabulary and grammar.

My theory was that the students would have an abundance of suggestions to enhance their current experience as ESL students, however, this was not the case. In the interpretation of the data collected, the grounded theory method was used to detect patterns in the results. While the outcome from the survey was contrary to the expectation that students would be critical of the ways in which the current curriculum met their linguistic needs, it provided the study with a lot of integral information moving into the design process. The patterns derived from grounded theory, specifically that Latinx population in East Tennessee sees itself as more of a cultural entity rather than an entity influenced by gender roles, are integral pieces of the new curriculum moving forward. Additionally, it is important to consider that Latinx people are primarily concerned about demonstrating gratitude for the opportunity to enhance their linguistic capabilities, therefore lessening their focus on what they would like to learn more about.

Discussion:

In using the context of cultural centrality to design an ESL curriculum that addresses the apparent gender gap in SLA, it is important to identify a platform that is universally interesting to both Latinx people and American people, creating a collaborative, communal classroom environment despite differing backgrounds and schedule allowances. The primary detractions from ESL class attendance are demanding work schedules (Menard-Warwick 178), so this curriculum is one that can be implemented within the traditional classroom context; however, it can also be applied to the abstract idea of a classroom, otherwise known as the student's day-to-day life. As previously established, gender is an integral component of any ESL curriculum because it affects the type of work that is often performed. While most Latinx immigrants are part of the service industry (2013 Census), a different type of job is often overlooked because it does not have a monetary salary. Motherhood is a common occupation among Latina immigrants and therefore should be considered when addressing gender as an influential factor within the workforce. Although the results of the study were not indicative of an apparent gender gap in regard to personal perception of linguistic opportunities, previous studies and statistics are indicative of an empirical gender gap as it applies to occupation and LEP.

Because the media has had such a large influence on modern society, this ESL curriculum will investigate media as it can be used as a teaching tool through both digital and paper platforms, as well as individual and collaborate platforms. To address concerns of digital literacy and affordability, this curriculum is constructed in a way so as to encourage digital interaction without requiring it. After consideration of the various ways in which English learners could interact uniquely, effectively and affordably with their curriculum, alone or in a group, the platform of a printed magazine with digital implementations was chosen. Students may choose to

interact with their curriculum on their own time, therefore avoiding the issue of schedule conflicts and cost of class enrollment. While collaboration is encouraged through the digital aspect of the curriculum, individual growth is facilitated through the paper platform.

The name QUE was chosen for the magazine because it emphasizes the theme of linguistic duality. On one hand, it reads “que” as in a queue for a line, while on the other it means “that” in Spanish. With an accent mark on the “e”, “que” is transformed into “qué” in Spanish, which means “what” in Spanish. By choosing a name that has several different meanings in varying languages, the audience is unified under a mutual understanding within distinct linguistic contexts.

QUE magazine differs from most in that it addresses digital literacy through optional QR code excursions to allow students to enhance their grammar and vocabulary capabilities, ultimately integrating themselves into their community linguistically through conversation practice. ARIS was the platform used to create the digital component of the project because it allowed for the creation of personal QR codes linked with conversation and grammar practices. Each QR code will allow students to connect with the English language through conversation practice, eventually leading to further explanations of grammar concepts and vocabulary mentioned in the magazine articles.

In terms of the content covered in each magazine, there will be a food section, an exercise section, a fashion section, a work section and a family section. A short introduction to each section will be provided with photos and activities that correspond with each topic. These sections were chosen specifically because of their cultural universality, as well as their intrigue in terms of linguistic comprehension. The goal of each section within the magazine is that the

student will not only learn helpful lifestyle tips, but also learn helpful information about the culture in which they are immersed. It is important to note that cultural assimilation is not a desired outcome, but rather cultural learning, allowing students to maintain their respective cultural identities while also acquiring a new linguistic skill set.

Conclusion:

The creation of this curriculum began with the intention to promote gender and racial equity, however it transitioned to also address issues of cultural fluidity and digital literacy. This curriculum would be an asset to any traditional classroom because it changes the teacher-student rhetoric by facilitating cultural conversations to enhance reading comprehension, digital literacy and conversational capabilities. This contrasts the traditional ESL curriculums that are often implemented in classes that primarily rely on diagrams and simple illustrations to teach languages. Through innovative second-language education, it is certain that students will gain a more thorough and interesting understanding of the world that surrounds them, both culturally and linguistically.

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