

Gender Differences in Early Childhood Vocabulary Acquisition: A Systematic Literature Review of Cognitive, Social, and Environmental Influence

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Abstract: This literature review examines gender differences in early childhood language acquisition through interactions among biological, cognitive, and sociocultural factors. Using a systematic review of research from the past two decades (14 primary studies and additional sources), the study finds that girls generally outperform boys in vocabulary, grammar, and communicative competence—achieving language milestones earlier, showing greater verbal fluency, and exhibiting more advanced pragmatic skills. These differences relate to cognitive advantages such as stronger verbal memory, faster language processing, and better executive functioning. Sociocultural factors—parental language input, caregiver–child interaction patterns, and gendered socialization—also shape linguistic experiences; girls often receive more verbally stimulating environments and are encouraged toward emotional expression, while boys face different interactional expectations. In conclusion, gender differences arise from a blend of biological, cognitive, and environmental dynamics. The findings have implications for educators, parents, and policymakers to design inclusive language-learning environments. Further research is recommended using longitudinal and cross-cultural approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition is the process by which individuals acquire the ability to communicate using words, phrases, and sentences in a particular language. It involves both understanding (receptive language) and producing (expressive language) verbal and non-verbal forms of communication. According to Selinker (2008), Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is the process of learning another language after the native language has been learned. Language knowledge is closely related to cognitive processes, as the understanding and processing of language elements occur in the brain (Fahriany and Albiansyah, 2020). Therefore, the use of language is not just about the passive recognition of words but involves active cognitive processing that helps individuals understand, store, and retrieve linguistic information.

Language development in early childhood is a foundational aspect of a child's growth.

Language acquisition refers to the process by which children learn to understand, produce, and use language effectively. The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) was proposed by Eric Lenneberg in 1967. Lenneberg suggested that there is a specific period in human development, typically ending around puberty, during which individuals have the greatest ability to acquire language naturally (Contesse, 2024). Early childhood, typically defined as the period from birth to age eight, is a critical time for language development. During these years, children rapidly absorb language from their environment, forming the foundation for communication skills that will shape their cognitive and social abilities throughout life. This interaction helps them gradually build the skills they need to understand not only the sounds of language (phonology) but also the meaning (semantics) and the rules of how to use language appropriately in different contexts (pragmatics and grammar) (Clark, 2002).

One important aspect of language development in early childhood is vocabulary acquisition. A child's vocabulary expands rapidly during the early years, playing a central role in overall language development. Over time, children begin to master more words, expand their use of those words, and understand their meanings in various contexts. Gender differences in vocabulary acquisition have become a significant topic of interest in language development research. Many parents, especially mothers, often worry when their child's vocabulary seems to develop more slowly compared to their peers. This concern is common, particularly when boys appear to acquire language skills at a slower pace than girls. However, this is typically a natural variation in language development rather than an indication of developmental issues.

Research generally indicates that girls tend to acquire vocabulary more quickly than boys at younger ages. Studies have shown that girls, on average, produce their first words earlier and acquire a larger vocabulary by age two compared to boys. This does not necessarily imply that boys are delayed in their language development but rather reflects natural variations in the speed of vocabulary acquisition, influenced by a range of biological, cognitive, and social factors. Biological factors, such as differences in brain development between boys and girls, may contribute to these differences. Likewise, cognitive and social factors, such as the linguistic environment, types of social interactions, and parental communication styles, play a significant role in shaping the type and amount of vocabulary children acquire.

In this context, the main research questions are:

1. What are the gender differences in vocabulary acquisition during early childhood development?
2. How are these differences influenced by biological, cognitive, and social factors?

The aim of this literature review is to explore gender differences in vocabulary acquisition in early childhood and examine how these differences are influenced by biological, cognitive, and social factors. By investigating these differences, the review seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to variations in vocabulary development across genders during the early years of life.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THEORIES

Language acquisition in early childhood is a fundamental process that shapes a child's ability to communicate, learn, and interact with others. There are several theories that attempt to explain how children acquire language. These theories offer different perspectives on whether language learning is primarily a product of innate abilities or shaped by environmental influences. Some of the most well-known theories are the Nativist Theory.

A. Nativist Theory (Chomsky)

Noam Chomsky is one of the most influential linguists of the twentieth century and still today he

dominates the scene of theoretical linguistics. He is most famous for his unique linguistic philosophy. The Nativist Theory, introduced by linguist Noam Chomsky, posits that humans have an innate ability to acquire language. The language faculty has an initial state, genetically determined; in the normal course of development it passes through a series of states in early childhood, reaching a relatively stable steady state that undergoes little subsequent change, apart from the lexicon. To a good first approximation, the initial state appears to be uniform for the species. Adapting traditional terms to a special usage, we call the theory of the state attained its grammar and the theory of the initial state Universal Grammar (UG). (Chomsky, 1995: 14) retrieved from (Barman, 2012). Chomsky's nativism suggests that language is an innate faculty, meaning that humans are born with an inherent ability or capacity for language. This idea implies that, from birth, humans have a built-in system or set of rules that helps them learn and use language. This set of rules is referred to as Universal Grammar (UG). One of the most compelling aspects of the Nativist Theory is the observation that children, regardless of their cultural or linguistic background, go through similar stages of language development. They all begin by babbling, progress to single words, then two-word combinations, and eventually form complex sentences. This universal pattern suggests that language acquisition is driven by an innate biological process, rather than learned solely from the environment.

B. Social Interactionist Theory (Vygotsky, Bruner)

Social interactionist theories, particularly those proposed by Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner, emphasize the critical role of social interaction in language development. According to Vygotsky, children learn language through guided interaction with more knowledgeable individuals (such as caregivers, teachers, or peers). Vygotsky (1978 cited Wertsch1985) retrieved from Topçiu (2015) declares that the child receive the knowledge initially through the contacts and interactions with people, and then assimilates this knowledge adding the personal values in it. This passage from the social to the personal qualities, is not a simple imitation but a transfer of what has been learned from the interaction to the personal values. In the 1960s, Jerome Bruner developed a theory of cognitive growth, looked to focus on environmental and experiential factors. Bruner suggested that intellectual ability developed in stages through step-by-step changes, based on how the mind was utilised (Holbrook et. al, 2020). Jerome Bruner developed a theory of cognitive growth that emphasized the role of environmental and experiential factors in intellectual development. He proposed that intellectual abilities develop in stages, meaning that the mind grows and changes through step-by-step processes. Bruner argued that these changes are influenced by how a person interacts with their environment and the experiences they have. His theory suggests that cognitive development is not just about innate abilities or biological maturation but also about how the mind is actively engaged and utilized in learning. In essence, Bruner believed that learning is a dynamic process shaped by both internal cognitive mechanisms and external factors like experiences and interactions with the world.

C. Cognitive Development Theory (Piaget)

Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development focuses on how children develop their thinking abilities over time. According to Piaget, children actively construct their understanding of the world through interaction with their environment. Cognitive theories describe an interaction between the child and the environment, in which development occurs through a “constant process of going back and forth between the person and the environment” (Piaget, 1929) Retrieved from (Shaviro, 2018). Piaget viewed children as active learners who constantly build their understanding of the world through experiences. Children are not passive recipients of information; they actively engage with their environment to create knowledge. He believed that cognitive development occurs in four distinct stages, The four cognitive stages are: Sensorimotor

(Birth – 2 years), Preoperational (2 – 7 years), Concrete Operational (7 – 11 years), Formal Operation (11 years on).

METHOD

The methodology for conducting a literature review on gender differences in language acquisition in early childhood will follow a structured approach, focusing on the evaluation and synthesis of existing research, searching relevant databases, and synthesizing data from multiple studies. This approach will highlight the underlying theories and identify key patterns and insights in the field.

1. Literature Review Analysis

The review will cover studies related to gender differences in language acquisition, early childhood language development, and cognitive development, with a particular focus on how these areas intersect. This involves a thorough examination of the body of literature, focusing on understanding the findings of previous studies, identifying gaps, and integrating various perspectives. According to Snyder (2019), a theoretical review should include both recent and relevant information provided by the significant authors in each domain of expertise. It is a relevant way of summarizing and synthesizing different research findings, particularly when data comes from different knowledge areas.

2. Search Strategy

The primary tool for sourcing relevant academic papers will be Google Scholar, chosen for its accessibility and extensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature. The search will utilize targeted keywords such as "gender differences in language acquisition," "early childhood language development," "gender differences in early childhood language milestones," "cognitive development and gender differences in language acquisition," "biological vs. social factors in language development," and "gendered language acquisition and cultural influences." These search terms are carefully selected to ensure a comprehensive collection of literature that spans both empirical studies and theoretical perspectives on the topic. To maintain relevance, the review will prioritize studies published within the last 20 years, focusing on peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and seminal works that provide valuable insights into the key aspects of gendered language development in early childhood.

Table 1: Articles to be Reviewed

No.	Authors & Title	Published
1	Boyle, J. P. - <i>Sex differences in listening vocabulary</i>	1987, Language Learning
2	Bourke, L. & Adams, A. M. - <i>Is it difference in Language skills and Working memory that Account for Girls Being Better in Writing than Boys</i>	2011, Journal of Writing Research
3	Marjanović, U. - <i>Early language development: vocabulary comparison of Slovenian boys and girls</i>	2015, Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies
4	Gleason, J. B., & Ely, R. - <i>Gender differences in language development</i>	2002, In Biology, society, and behavior: The development of sex differences in cognition (pp. 179-199).

5	Brody, L. - <i>Parental socialization of emotion expression: gender differences and relations to child adjustment</i>	1999, Emotion: The American Psychological Association
6	Hyde, J. S., & Linn, M. C. - <i>Gender differences in verbal ability: A meta-analysis</i>	1988, Psychological Bulletin
7	Qian, W. - <i>A study of the influence of gender differences on English learning of senior high school students</i>	2015, Higher Education of Social Science
8	Leaper, C., & Smith, T. E. - <i>A meta-analytic review of gender variations in children's language use</i>	2004, Developmental Psychology
9	Smith, T. E., Leaper, C., & Huesmann, L. R. - <i>The interactive context of gender differences in talkativeness</i>	2004, Developmental Psychology
10	Campbell, T. - <i>Parental socialization of emotion expression</i>	1998, Emotion
11	Gass, S., & Selinker, L. - <i>Second language acquisition</i>	2009, Palgrave Macmillan UK
12	Eriksson, M., Marschik, P. B., Tulviste, T., Almgren, M., Pérez Pereira, M., Wehberg, S., & Gallego, C. - <i>Differences between girls and boys in emerging language skills: Evidence from 10 language communities</i>	2012, British Journal of Developmental Psychology
13	Meisel, J. M. - <i>Second language acquisition in early childhood</i>	2009, Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft
14	Huang, S. - <i>Effect of Gender in SLA, Inspiring Gender Roles SLA Research</i>	2022, International Journal of Education and Humanities

3. Data Synthesis

In the data synthesis stage, the studies will be systematically analyzed and compared to identify common findings, inconsistencies, or unexplored topics. The synthesis will specifically focus on how biological, cognitive, and social factors contribute to gender differences in language acquisition. First, studies exploring biological factors, such as verbal memory, auditory processing, and brain development, will be examined to assess whether innate physiological differences between boys and girls, like girls' faster vocabulary development, consistently influence language acquisition. Next, the role of cognitive factors including memory, attention, and processing speed will be explored to understand how these abilities may contribute to gendered differences in language learning, particularly in the retention and recall of words. Lastly, the synthesis will address social factors, such as gendered socialization practices and cultural expectations, by analyzing how variations in parental interactions, peer dynamics, and societal norms influence language development in boys and girls. The goal is to integrate findings from these areas, identify discrepancies across studies, and highlight any gaps in the literature. Ultimately, the synthesis will provide a comprehensive understanding of how these factors interact in shaping gender differences in language acquisition and suggest areas for future research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we will synthesize the findings from the literature reviewed, discuss the implications of the research on gender differences in language acquisition during early childhood, and explore how various biological, cognitive, and social factors influence these differences.

Table 2: Gender Differences in Language Acquisition

Theme	Girls	Boys	Key Findings
Vocabulary Development	- Larger expressive and receptive vocabularies.	- May perform better in vocabulary comprehension in some cases	Girls typically have a larger vocabulary compared to boys by early childhood, particularly in expressive language.
Syntax and Grammar Development	- Acquire grammatical structures faster and more accurately. - Show more complex sentence structures.	- Acquire grammar slower and less accurately. - May take longer to master grammatical rules.	Girls' superior verbal skills lead to quicker mastery of grammar, while boys may lag in acquiring grammar.
Pragmatic Language Skills	- Engage more in social language use, especially in child-adult conversations. - More likely to express emotions such as sadness.	- Less likely to initiate conversations with adults. - More likely to express anger and disharmonious emotions.	Girls are more talkative in child-adult interactions and tend to express more emotional content in speech. Boys often express anger or other less socially harmonious emotions.
Cognitive Theories	- Demonstrate better verbal memory and faster language processing speeds.	- May take longer to develop verbal memory and processing speed.	Cognitive advantages in girls (e.g., faster word recall and better verbal memory) contribute to quicker language acquisition.
Socialization and Gender Roles	- Socialized to engage in talk-oriented social interactions, which encourages verbal communication skills.	- May participate in less verbal communication, often focusing on more physical or action-oriented activities.	Socialization reinforces verbal communication in girls, while boys engage in activities that emphasize actions rather than talk.
Parental and Caregiver Influence	- Parents tend to use more emotional or relational language with girls. - More verbal communication with girls.	- Parents use more directive language with boys. - Less emotional communication with boys.	Parental interaction patterns reinforce gendered language development, with girls receiving more emotional and verbal input, while boys receive

			more directive communication.
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4.1 Gender Differences in Language Acquisition

Language acquisition is a complex process influenced by numerous factors, including biological, social, and cultural influences. Research has highlighted certain gender differences in language development that emerge early in life and can be observed in various aspects of language acquisition, from vocabulary size to social language use.

Vocabulary Development

In the area of vocabulary acquisition, gender has also been a significant factor. Numerous studies have explored gender differences in various aspects of lexical acquisition. Several of these studies have investigated both receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge in learners, leading to differing conclusions. Boyle (1987) found that, in an exceptional case, boys were more proficient than girls in understanding vocabulary they had heard. Similarly, Scarcella and Zimmerman (1998) observed that men performed significantly better than women in tests of academic vocabulary recognition, comprehension, and usage. Early language development is marked by several key milestones, and research has consistently shown some gender differences in how boys and girls acquire language during these early years.

These differences can be seen in areas such as the acquisition of vocabulary growth. According to Marjanovič (2015), Girls tend to have a larger expressive vocabulary (words they can say) and receptive vocabulary (words they understand) in early childhood. By 18–24 months, girls often have a greater number of words in their active vocabulary than boys. This difference in vocabulary size can be particularly noticeable during the toddler years. The study conducted by Bourke and Adams (2011) revealed that, on average, boys aged 4-5 years wrote well-practiced and memorized words, such as their own name and those of other family members, as well as captions. However, they were less able than girls to incorporate phonologically plausible attempts to spell new words and phrases/sentences. Girls, on average, included more words and a broader range of vocabulary in their writing. They were also more likely to write more phrases and sentences.

Syntax and Grammar Development

Gender differences in early language acquisition have been observed not only in vocabulary development but also in grammar and syntax. While there are individual differences and overlapping patterns, research has consistently found that girls tend to acquire grammatical structures and syntactic rules more quickly and with greater accuracy than boys. The finding that girls are more talkative than boys aligns with the common stereotype that women are more talkative than men (James & Drakich, 1993) and is also supported by research suggesting that girls tend to be more verbally skilled than boys (Hyde & Linn, 1988). These differences in verbal behaviour could partly explain why girls might acquire grammatical concepts, such as past tense or plurals, earlier and more accurately than boys. Additionally, the quantity of speech may support the development of quality in grammar, as the more children speak, the more opportunities they have to practice and refine their understanding of complex grammatical rules. The increased talkativeness and verbal skill observed in girls may be linked to faster acquisition of grammatical structures and greater sentence complexity, as they tend to engage more actively in verbal communication, which facilitates their linguistic development.

Pragmatic Language Skills

Pragmatic language skills refer to the use of language in social contexts, including the ability to understand and use language appropriately in different situations. Gender Differences in

Early Language Acquisition in the context of social interaction is an area of significant research, particularly regarding how boys and girls use language for conversation initiation, turn-taking, and emotional expression. Gender differences are often observed in the types of conversations children initiate, the strategies they use in interactions, and the emotional content of their speech.

One factor that influenced the likelihood and degree of gender differences in talkativeness was whether the child was interacting with a peer or an adult. No significant gender differences were observed during peer interactions. However, girls spoke noticeably more than boys during child–adult interactions. According to Gleason & Ely (2002), this may indicate that girls are more likely than boys to initiate conversations. Gender differences in children's emotional expression have been observed as early as preschool age, with girls being less likely to express anger and more likely to express sadness compared to boys (Brody, 1999; Saarni, 1984). This may lead to a tendency for girls to more often convey submissive emotions, such as sadness and anxiety, while boys are more likely to express disharmonious emotions, such as anger and laughing at others (Chaplin and Cole, 2005).

4.2 Factors Affecting Gender Differences in Language Acquisition

Gender differences in language acquisition are shaped by cognitive theories emphasizing how brain development and executive functions influence language learning, socialization processes that encourage gender-specific communication styles and behaviours, and parental and caregiver influences through differential language input and interaction patterns based on gender expectations.

Cognitive Theories of Language Acquisition

Cognitive abilities, such as memory and processing speed, play a significant role in shaping gender differences in language acquisition. For instance, research shows that girls often demonstrate superior verbal memory, allowing them to acquire and retain vocabulary more quickly, while boys may take longer to develop verbal memory skills. Additionally, girls tend to process language-related information faster than boys, which can contribute to their earlier mastery of grammar, syntax, and word recall. These cognitive differences, however, are not absolute and can be influenced by a range of environmental and social factors. Qian (2015) mentioned that biologically, women have better-developed speech and hearing organs than men, which makes them more skilled in verbal expression and auditory perception, leading to better English grades. Additionally, girls tend to have stronger memory abilities, which aids their foreign language learning.

Socialization and Gender Roles

According to Smith et, al (2004), One aspect of the interactive context that affected the likelihood and the magnitude of a gender difference in talkativeness was whether the child was interacting with a peer or an adult. Regardless of the causes, one potential consequence is that girls may be more likely than boys to practice a talk-oriented approach to social interaction during early childhood. The type of interaction that occurs, whether with peers, adults, or in formal/informal situations, can also influence gender differences in speaking. Girls tend to engage more in social contexts that encourage longer and more emotional conversations, while boys may more often participate in activities that require less verbal communication. Interactions with peers or social groups dominated by a particular gender can also reinforce different communication patterns based on social expectations. The likelihood and magnitude of gender differences in talkativeness can be influenced by the type of interaction, whether with peers or adults. Girls are more likely than boys to engage in talk-oriented social interactions during early childhood, which may reinforce their verbal communication skills. All of these factors contribute

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to shaping language acquisition patterns based on social expectations.

Parental and Caregiver Influences

Parents and caregivers often interact differently with boys and girls, which can influence how language is acquired. For example, parents may engage in more verbal communication with girls, encouraging them to express themselves more, while they may be more directive or talk less with boys. These differences in interaction styles affect the development of language skills, including the ability to communicate effectively, understand social cues, and use language in various contexts. Campbell (1998) said we observed that mothers would use more directive speech with sons than with daughters. mothers of school-age children using more directive speech with daughters than with sons. Given the age level at which this difference was found, perhaps mothers were actually encouraging more autonomy in their sons by using fewer directives with them than with their daughters. The language parents and caregivers use with boys and girls can differ in both content and style. For instance, parents might use more emotional or relational language with girls, while using more directive or action-oriented language with boys. This gendered language input can lead to differences in linguistic development, such as vocabulary size, emotional expression, and conversation skills. These variations in language input also influence pragmatic skills, such as turn-taking and understanding social norms in communication.

CONCLUSION

A. Summary of Key Findings: Gender Differences in Language Acquisition

In summary, this literature review has examined the gender differences in language acquisition during early childhood, highlighting the interplay of biological, cognitive, and social factors that contribute to these differences. The evidence consistently shows that girls tend to acquire language skills more rapidly and effectively than boys, particularly in areas such as vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatic language use. These disparities are shaped by a combination of cognitive abilities, socialization practices, and parental expectations, all of which play a crucial role in language development. Understanding these factors is essential for fostering supportive environments that promote optimal language development for both boys and girls during this critical period of early childhood. By recognizing the complex nature of these gender differences, educators, caregivers, and researchers can better support children's language development in ways that account for both individual and gender-related variations.

B. Implications for Early Childhood Education

The findings from the literature review on gender differences in language acquisition during early childhood have significant implications for Early Childhood Education (ECE). Understanding these differences and the factors influencing them can help educators create more inclusive, effective, and responsive learning environments for both boys and girls. The implications of gender differences in language acquisition during early childhood are crucial for enhancing educational practices. By recognizing and addressing these differences, Early Childhood Educators can foster an environment that nurtures language development in all children, regardless of gender. Tailoring strategies to accommodate the cognitive, social, and biological needs of both boys and girls can lead to more effective and equitable language learning outcomes. Ultimately, a gender-sensitive approach in ECE can help ensure that all children receive the support they need to reach their full potential in language and communication development.

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