

# Gender and the Languages Classroom

By Clayton Forno

Clayton Forno is Head of Languages at Somerville House.

---

*“There are no differences in what boys and girls can learn. But there are big differences in the best ways to teach them” Sax (2005, p.106).*

In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature, drawing from significant research findings regarding brain-based gender differences, which discusses variations in the ways males and females can learn. Specific, separate teaching techniques for both male and female students have been proposed. James (2009), for example, deals with this issue in the context of the teaching of Mathematics and Science. In this respect, Sax (2005) provides examples for the teaching of English and Mathematics, while also explaining gender differences in a range of other contexts (for example, friendships).

An exciting challenge for educators is to design further teaching techniques in all academic disciplines that take account of gender. From the perspective of an all-girls' school, this paper presents two examples of learning experiences for the teaching of Languages to female students that take into account two significant neurological findings. Further activities for the teaching of Languages to girls have been designed, and are continuing to be developed, by the Languages Department at Somerville House in an aim, shared by every other area of the School, to provide excellence in catering for the learning needs of all students.

## A preface

However, it is necessary firstly to state that gender differences are certainly not the only basis on which teachers design learning experiences to cater for students. Teachers are acutely aware that our students learn at different speeds, and there are variables such as an individual learner's personality that may determine his or her preferred and effective ways of learning. It may also be that some preferred learning styles are due to students' cultural background, or what learners are used to. Much of the relevant literature (for example, Allen, 2010) does not explicitly attribute learning styles simply to gender and it may be that many other factors are involved. Furthermore, this paper should not be read as suggesting a 'labelling' of students as having preferred, or more effective, learning styles, simply on the basis of their gender. It may well be the case that there is significant overlap in the preferred and effective learning styles of males and females. On the other hand, researchers such as James (2009) and Sax (2005) make it clear that, while there can be exceptions, there are learning styles that can be more effective for a majority of female students or, conversely, a majority of male students.

## Example One

Sax (2005, pp. 29-30), for example, draws on comprehensive research which shows that in the brains of pre-adolescent children, activity relating to emotional reactions is located specifically in what is called the amygdala. At that stage of children's lives, the area of the brain associated with higher cognitive functions, such as reflection, reasoning and language - the cerebral cortex - has few direct connections with the amygdala. During adolescence, the female brain develops connections between the amygdala and the cerebral cortex. However, in adolescent boys, emotional activity remains largely in the amygdala until much later in their lives.

Therefore, it has been concluded that from adolescence, girls are more likely than boys to be able to verbalise and articulate feelings (Sax, 2005). For female learners in a Languages classroom, a typical activity, within the study of a film, might be to have the students taking the role of a particular character in a studied film, and discuss perspectives and feelings from that character's point of view. Male students, on the other hand, may benefit from, and enjoy more, a greater focus on objectivity in their study of the film.

## Example Two

The corpus callosum - the dense bundle of nerves connecting the two hemispheres of the brain - is denser and larger in females, resulting in greater connections between both hemispheres (Sasser, 2011). Therefore, it has been stated that female learners might enjoy and benefit from activities which require connections between both hemispheres of the brain (Sasser, 2011). For Languages at Somerville House, this could occur through having our learners make the link between their study of the Environment (typically a Senior Languages topic), for example, and work on similar topics they have studied, or are currently covering, in subjects such as Science and Geography. This interdisciplinary exercise could involve a variety of skills drawing on both hemispheres of the brain. In contrast, boys may not prefer or benefit from such connection-making as much as girls.

## A comment about both examples

In presenting the examples above, it is necessary to emphasise that, as stated in the quotation by Sax (2005) at the beginning of this article, there are no differences in what girls and boys are capable of learning, but there are significant differences in the ways in which they might learn.

## Conclusions

The study of gender and how it relates to learning is a significant part of education. It can provide teachers with further, useful tools to cater for the diverse range of learning needs of students. This paper has presented but two examples of the many ways, currently being used and developed in Languages at Somerville House, in which gender can influence a Language teacher's choice of learning experiences for (female) students. As stated, these techniques are based on significant areas of brain research which relate to gender differences. Other such areas of neuroscience which can influence curriculum delivery, for example, are findings relating to spatial processing and sensory systems in the brain (see, for example, Sasser, 2011).

Finally, two useful, associated areas of focus are worth pursuing. Firstly, teachers are constantly reviewing and updating their classroom practice, and so it will be insightful and useful to evaluate the effectiveness of gender-based learning experiences with our students. This evaluation can involve feedback from learners. Secondly, it is worth helping our students to discover the possible usefulness to them of those strategies that might not be necessarily part of their repertoire of preferred learning methods. This may develop their effectiveness as (life-long) learners. Furthermore, as we exist in a community of learners, this might give students an appreciation of how their classmates learn most effectively.

How gender influences learning is an exciting area of study for all educators. Future developments in neuroscience will doubtless continue to influence the ongoing development of pedagogical tools, for the benefit of all our students.

## References

- Allen, K., Nieter, V., and Scheve, J 2010, *Understanding learning styles*, Shell Education, London.
- James, A 2009, *Teaching the female brain*, Thousand Oaks, California, SAGE.
- Sasser, L 2011, 'Gender differences in learning', viewed 05 August 2013, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/149385314/Sasser-Gender-Differences-in-Learning>
- Sax, L 2005, *Why gender matters*, Broadway Books, New York.