

# The under achievement of boys in language learning



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For many years, research has been carried out in the field of applied linguistics, predominantly from a psychological perspective, on the attitudes towards foreign language positioning gender issues as important in understanding attitudes towards learning (Powell & Batters, 1985; Loulidi, 1990; Bacon & Finnemann, 1992; Ellis, 1994; Clark & Trafford, 1995, 1996), sited in Kobayashi 2002: 181). Gender differences in attitudes towards learning foreign languages have been repeatedly witnessed, compelling researchers to provide an explanation for the fact by drawing attention on the ways that gender may affect ones attitude in learning a foreign language.

Foreign languages in schools have been rendered as “ the subject in which the disparity between girls’ and boys’ performance is at its greatest” (Barton (2002), sited in Murphy 2010: 81). Considerable international data has emerged (Field, 2000; Chavez, 2001; Carr and Pauells, 2006), illustrating that achievement and participation in foreign languages in schools seems to be predominantly the domain of girls (Murphy, 2010). The underachievement

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of boys in language learning, the low participation of boys in foreign language modules as well the negative attitudes of boys towards the learning of a language has led in research trying to identify the underlying reasons. The gender gap noticed in performance on foreign languages at an international level (Murphy, 2010), has led in gender to be considered other than the socioeconomic background of students, also an important factor in understanding the attitudes of both girls and boys in learning foreign languages at school.

This paper seeks to explore and bring together the various factors affecting boys' attitudes towards the learning of a language. It attempts to understand why foreign language learning may be experiencing a particular delineation of participation and achievement along gender lines and to raise awareness of the issue of boys and foreign language learning. Moreover, this paper shall draw attention on the various methods that teachers could employ in order to motivate boys and raise their involvement and achievement.

## **Boys and foreign language learning**

Nowadays, due to an enormous amount of statistical information it is widely accepted that boys perform less well than girls in all kinds of schools with the greatest gap found in foreign languages (Murphy, 2010). Davies (2004) points out that researchers over the past decade (Barton, 2002; Jones & Jones, 2002; Clark & Trafford, 1996) have noted, in particular, that the disparity in performance between boys and girls is significantly greater in modern languages than in other areas of the curriculum. The option of learning a foreign language is not taken seriously by boys in schools with the majority of them refusing it or not fully becoming engaged with it (Murphy, <https://assignbuster.com/the-under-achievement-of-boys-in-language-learning/>

2010). Clark (1998) and Chavez (2001) argue that “ in reality, from the moment foreign language study becomes optional and as the study of foreign languages become more advanced in school systems, classrooms across the English language dominant communities of the world are inhabited primarily by girls”(Murphy, 2010: 81). Data taken from the UK, Australia and New Zealand shows the low participation of boys in foreign language learning. At advanced levels of foreign language learning in schools across these countries boys only count 24-38% of all students with an average of only 33% of male participation (Murphy, 2010).

In the UK specifically, the gender-gap in achievement among several subjects has been recognized by the government which in the Standards for Qualified Teacher Status has made explicit reference of the distinctive needs of boys and girls (Murphy, 2010) leading in teachers having as one of their main targets the development of strategies to respond to the different needs (Davies, 2004). It has been noticed that boys in the UK educational system “ generally have less favourable attitudes towards foreign language learning than girls and are less likely to take a language in a public examination” (Pritchard, 1987: 65). Davies (2004), points out that in 2000 the average size of the gender gap across subjects (i. e. girls’ results minus boys’) was 9. 2%, which prompted headlines such as “ Girls stay top of the class in GCSEs” (Guardian) and “ GCSE results reveal that boys are failing to close the gender gap” (Independent). The GCSE results in 2001 and 2002 have shown that the gender gap across all subjects is persisting at 9% with a higher figure of 15. 6% in modern languages indicating that boys are underperforming more severely in this subject; a phenomenon also

confirmed by the Nuffield Languages Inquiry (Davies 2004). For example, in 2000, statistics showed 44% of boys achieved grades A\*-C in French whereas 60% of girls achieved those marks. Comparable results were found in German with 49% of boys achieving Grades A\*-C compared to 63% of girls in the same year (Davies, 2004).

Bradford and Noble (2000) point out that an examination of the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) results as well as A-levels confirms that girls do far better than boys in foreign languages. Davies (2004) argues that if GCSE results serve as an indicator of linguistic performance that means that although statistics have shown some progress since 1992, the gender gap remains wide. In all secondary school subjects, modern languages are the most likely to be dropped by boys at key stage 4, being the least popular amongst the other subjects (Bradford & Noble 2000).

## **Main Concerns**

The above facts have led in a considerable amount of concern to be expressed about the underachievement of boys in various subjects, especially foreign languages (Williams et al. 2002). “ As we enter the next millennium, it is the underachievement of boys that has become one of the biggest challenges facing society today” (Wragg (1997), cited in Williams et al. 2002: 508).

A major concern is that due to the increasing disproportion between the percentage of girls and boys taking public examination in the five most popular languages taught in the UK (Powell 1979; Hawkins 1981) the profession of language teaching is becoming increasingly feminized

(Pritchard, 1987). According to Pritchard (1987), this is also a matter of concern as “ it means that fewer and fewer boys are likely to be available for training as future language teachers, a fact which makes it increasingly possible that boys will be taught predominantly by women teachers” (Pritchard, 1987: 65). In turn this is more likely to enhance the perception of boys that languages are a girl subject contributing in the maintenance of a vicious circle leading in boys’ underachievement in languages (Pritchard, 1987).

This leads in further concerns arising as “ language learning may be seen as a key component in pursuing the objectives of co-operation between states, respect for the identity of others and the promotion of mutual understanding” (Moys (1998), sited in Williams et al. 2002: 508). According to Graddol (1997), we move into an era where people’s future will need to be based on multilingualism therefore such a situation has severe consequences (Williams et al., 2002). The Nuffield Inquiry points to the need for foreign languages in the new century from a European perspective, from a business stance, and because of the rising need for international communication and highlights the fact that many employees in Europe can speak a second, third and fourth language. “ Speaking English alone will not be enough to ensure a full and productive participation in the 21st Century” (Graddol (1997), sited in Williams et al., 2002).

Moreover, Williams et al. (2002) point out that both the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) and the Nuffield Inquiry indicate that there is a need for foreign language as the lack of it has been a major barrier in business.

The Nuffield Inquiry identifies that there is an inadequate supply of language  
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skills available to industry across a range of languages and points out that UK companies are more deficient in linguistic and cultural competence than their major European competitors. It recommends that in order to promote international understanding and contribute to economic success the government should show commitment in setting a national policy agenda for languages and enhance international dimension in education (Williams et al., 2002).

## **Reviewing the reasons**

To be able to deal with these issues one (either that is the government, school or teachers) must be aware of the personal, interpersonal and external factors leading in boys opting out or underachieving in foreign language learning. As according to the Office of National Statistics (1999) girls consistently outperform boys both in GCSE and A-Levels in modern languages there must be mainly gender differences that cause this consistency.

Murphy (2010) argues that “ efforts to understand and to explain the effect of gender on language learning, and in this case in particular foreign-language learning, can generally be categorised into the traditional binary structure of either nature or nurture” (Murphy, 2010: 89). According to Murphy (2010), differences in language learning between girls and boys may be attributed to two positions namely, the essentialist and anti-essentialist position.

The essentialist position contends that there are innate and inherent brain differences between females and males, which result in different language

learning abilities for the two sexes (Young and Brozo (2001), cited in Murphy, 2010). According to the essentialist position, “ linguistic information goes directly to the seat of language processing in the female brain, whereas males use sensory machinery to do a great deal of work in untangling linguistic data resulting in more inefficient processing of language” (Murphy, 2010: 89). As per this perspective girls are ‘ qualified’ with possessing other innate characteristics that give them advantage in foreign language classes i. e. enhanced aural, oral and memory skills as well as social and collaborative learning styles, intrinsic motivation and concentration (Murphy, 2010).

Cecco and Shaw (2008), point out that according to brain research brains develop differently according to gender even before we are born, with females having more language centres and males having more visuo-spatial centres. Moreover, they point out that there are three preferred ways of learning i. e. auditory, visual and kinaesthetic, with the visual and kinaesthetic learners processing information mainly from the right side of the brain, the dominant side in boys’ learning. According to Noble et al. (2001), verbal and linguistic intelligence required for language learning is linked to the auditory learning – the weakest style in boys (Cecco and Shaw, 2008).

The anti-essentialist position holds a socio-cultural perspective contending that gender is about socially constructed maleness and femaleness and the performance of same (Murphy, 2010). Carr and Pauwels (2006) argue that “ it is generally accepted that enduring hegemonic versions of masculinity in society accord little importance to the oracy skills, personal expression, disclosure, introspection, exploration and literate practices, which form the

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bedrock of foreign language classroom practice” (Carr and Pauwels (2006), cited in Murphy, 2010: 89). According to this perspective, language classrooms therefore involve ways of working and learning, which contradict the dominant versions of masculinity, that frame many males’ out-of-school experience (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998; Hall and Coles 2001, cited in Murphy, 2010). As males of school-going age experience particular pressure to be accepted, to conform and to perform hegemonic versions of masculinity many males will avoid, dismiss and reject ‘peer-disdained activities’ (Rankin et al., 2004) of which foreign language is one, with the resulting consequences for relative male participation and achievement (Murphy, 2010).

According to Cecco and Shaw (2008), the factors for gender differences explained by nurture cover various learned attitudes and behaviours that seem often to be modelled unconsciously. Minns (1991) argues that “social and cultural attitudes about gender are learnt from birth and are modelled and reinforced, often unconsciously, by parents and other significant adults, including teachers” (Minns 1991, cited in Cecco and Shaw 2008: 11). Bleach (1998) also argues that socialisation towards particular roles takes place based on the adult ‘version’ of appropriate behaviour (Cecco and Shaw, 2008).

According to Barton (1997), differentiation between the sexes from birth is inevitable and important as our identity is determined by the knowledge of our sex. Most parents encourage behaviours appropriate to the child’s gender e. g. males are expected to be more noisy and adventurous whereas girls are supposed to be passive and dependent to others. The toys and <https://assignbuster.com/the-under-achievement-of-boys-in-language-learning/>

games given to children nature the characteristics conforming each gender. e. g. cars and building kits foster creativity and spatial awareness whereas dolls, teddy bears or domestic appliances such as cookers mostly resemble human or animal life (Barton, 1997). Therefore, Barton (1997) argues that “ if we consider the prerequisites for language learning, it becomes clear that girls’ toys, promoting human contact and communication, give them [girls] an immediate advantage over boys” (Barton, 1997: 11).

Moreover, it is argued that role models in the home have an influence in the child’s life and ways of learning (Barton, 1997). The male figure model is more practical and goes out to work daily whereas the female prepares meals, takes care of the children and doesn’t work so hard. Even where children live in an environment which does not conform to domestic norms they may be influenced by those stereotypes through the media. Therefore, their learning is also influenced as girls are meant to sit down and abuse their brains whereas boys are meant to move around. (Barton, 1997)

Furthermore, studies have showed that both parents and teachers interactions with children can either consciously or otherwise endorse the different approaches of the two sexes to language use (Barton, 1997).

Fagot’s (1977) study revealed that teachers’ interactions with girls were more verbal whereas they tended to join in with boys’ play (Barton, 1997).

Boys’ unwillingness to listen to others as well as the challenge required by them in order to get motivated do not enable them to perform well in language learning as the lesson makes demands of them that are inconsistent with the linguistic role normally expected of them by the society (Barton, 1997).

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Moreover, peer pressure is considered to be an important social factor affecting the attitudes of boys towards learning a language. Young's research (1994) offers much in support of the view that " learner perceptions and experience of peer attitudes concerning school, education, foreign language learning in general or the learning of a particular language in question may exert considerable influence on the individual's own FLL orientation, attitudes and motivation" (Bartram, 2006: 47). Also, Walqui (2000) argues that teenage peer pressure usually has a negative effect on language learning due to the performance element involved in this learning which may provoke feelings of insecurity and embarrassment (Bartram, 2006). According to Barton (1997) " male adolescents will, no doubt, find it much more difficult than females to relinquish their hold on their primary means of communication and expose their breaking voices to their peers' ridicule" (Barton, 1997: 12). The fact that males have a need to show off and be thought as successful does not ' allow' them to get involved with something that would make them feel insecure or embarrassed. " Boys [...] ' think success is sad', and that image is all-important" (Hofkins, (1995), siten in Barton, 1997: 12).

In addition, peer group pressure is considered be a key reason for the demotivation of boys in learning languages as according to Court (2001) boys need to assert their emerging sexual identity (Bartram, 2006). Due to the feminised associations of language learning boys usually reject it or do not get involved with it. Barton (1997) argues that " making clear one's sexual identity and appearing ' one of the lads' is, it seems, foremost in the male adolescent mind and is often achieved by appearing uninterested and

boasting of missed homework” (Barton, 1997: 12). In their momentous study of psychological research published, Jacklin and Macoby (1974) came to the conclusion that boys are more susceptible to peer pressure than girls with teachers and advisors investigating male underachievement coming up with remarkably similar findings (Barton, 1997).

The fact that boys need to assert their sexual identity can be supported by studies into attitudes and motivation towards learning different languages in the UK. Chambers reported a differential rise in the number of students entering for GCSE examinations in French (4%) and German (22%) between 1991 and 1994 (Williams et al., 2002). Philips and Filmer-Sankey’s (1993) findings showed that the majority of pupils of both sexes preferred learning German to learning French and that more boys than girls showed an interest in learning German. According to Barton (1997), this is due to the fact that German has a masculine image and is viewed as more useful by boys for industry and commerce.

Interviews of students have revealed that French is considered ‘feminine’ and not ‘cool’ for boys to make an effort in learning French (Williams et al., 2002). “In the popular imagination French would be associated with fine wines, good cooking, haute couture and luxurious perfumes – all either ‘domestic’ or ‘feminine’ in orientation [whereas] German language is associated in pupils’ minds with masculine-type imagery such as ‘war’, ‘harshness’, ‘strictness’, ‘shouting’, the ‘Nazis’ and ‘Hitler (Pritchard, 1987: 65). The fact that French is considered as feminine is considered to contribute in the low motivation and achievement of boys in French as they do not wish to harm their image and sexual identity.

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Furthermore, the fact that the most popular and widely taught language in the UK is French is particularly offputting boys who are far less inclined than girls to see French as useful to them in a future job or course of study (Powell and Littlewood, 1983) (Pritchard, 1987). Moreover, there has been evidence to suggest that “ boys rate French as more difficult (Clark & Trafford, 1996), less important (Powell & Batters, 1985) and less relevant to their future lives than girls (Pritchard, 1987)” (Court, 2001: 7).

Stables and Wikeley (1999) found that other reasons putting boys off involve the belief that modern languages are difficult and that they are not required for international communication. Although science and mathematics may also be considered as difficult, boys view the effort as necessary due to the importance of the qualification. Stables and Wikeley (1999) point out that “ Employers do not, in general, require GCSE in a modern language; to be more exact, pupils seem little aware that they might. Thus the difficulty that many pre-GCSE pupils seem to find with modern foreign languages is not offset in many cases by the belief that the effort is really worthwhile” (Stables and Wikeley, 1999: 30). Moreover, Stables and Wikeley (1999) argue that in the UK where the home language is also the dominant international language, motivation to learn is inevitably less than in countries where failure to speak other languages is seen as severely personally limiting. As members of a national culture with strong international standing, pupils may also lack motivation in the form of curiosity about other national cultures (Stables and Wikeley, 1999).

What also seems to de-motivate male students in learning foreign languages is the lesson content itself as well as the assessment methods used. Barton  
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(1997) points out that features of the language lesson may seem as a threat to male identity. Reading fictional novels, that is considered as a feminine activity, puts boys off as they prefer informative texts such as newspapers, articles and comics; a thing which needs to be bared in mind by teachers and educators. Moreover, as dialogue is crucial in learning a language, boys usually hesitate to get involved as dialogues indicate vulnerability (Barton, 1997). Boys usually hesitate to ask for directions or corrections. In an investigation into patterns of interactions in foreign language classes, Sunderland (1998) found that even if boys did talk more, the girls exhibited more sophisticated interactions, and “ actively created learning opportunities for themselves and took advantage of those the teacher provided them with” (Sunderland (1998), sited in Williams et al. 2002: 508) Furthermore, due to the fact that boys from a young age are not taught to sit still and listen but to search for the experience, they are ‘ unable’ to concentrate on language tasks, leading in teachers complaining about boys’ attitude in the classroom (Barton, 1997).

Moreover, Jones and Jones (2001) have found that boys see modern languages as different from other subjects mainly because of the central position of the teacher in the language classroom and that boys who are underperforming tend to see the teacher as responsible for the difficulties they are having because the pedagogy of modern languages is so teacher-centred ( Cecco and Shaw, 2008: 7).

In addition, Cecco and Shaw (2008) point out that boys’ attributes are not particularly favoured by the requirements of coursework, i. e. sustained effort, process as well as outcome and often a considerable amount of well-  
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presented written work. Although exams themselves may suit boys' sudden bursts of effort, national awards in recent years have incorporated increased amounts of coursework. However, Arnot et al. (1998) argue that fairness to all learners involves a variety of assessment modes so that all pupils have opportunities to produce their best performance (Cecco & Shaw, 2008).

Other factors that seem to contribute in the underachievement of boys include the sex of the teacher as well as teacher expectations. As mentioned in the previous section most language teachers are females and this is considered to perpetuate the myth that languages are feminine subjects. However, Clark and Trafford's recent survey showed that students ascribed more importance to teachers' personalities than to their sex and many boys in Powell and Batters' study preferred a female teacher because it contributed to their overall perception of languages as an easy, non-serious subject (Barton, 1997). On the other hand it is argued that " a boy who is susceptible to peer pressure (found most commonly in the weaker sets) will not be highly motivated to set himself apart from his fellows and affiliate himself with a subject dominated by feminine connotations" (Barton, 1997: 13).

In addition, the fact that the gender-gap in language learning is widely acknowledged as well as boys' attitudes towards the subject often leads in teachers being either consciously or unconsciously biased towards their students. Although there is not much evidence to support this it is argued that " teachers will focus their attention on the girls, assuming that the boys will not be interested in continuing their study of a feminine subject" (Barton,

1997: 14). This leads in enhancing both their belief that foreign languages are feminine and their negative attitudes towards the language.

## **Raising boys' achievement**

The above factors discussed lead into boys being de-motivated to learn the language resulting in their underachievement. The findings of a group of PGCE students at Goldsmiths College conducting interviews in two schools to ask boys why they thought girls did better at Modern

Languages predictably showed poor motivation as a key factor: ' Us boys don't take it seriously. Some days, I just think oh it's French today and I ain't going to try very hard if I don't want'. (Harris, 1998: 57) Cecco and Shaw (2008) point out that motivation is a central component to successfully acquire knowledge and that lack of motivation can hinder learning whereas being motivated can greatly enhance it. " Particularly welcome is the assumption that motivation can be increased or decreased; that it is not a unitary characteristic of which learners have a lot or a little" (Cecco and Shaw, 2008: 6) The issue of motivation has always been on the agenda in language learning. In order to raise boys' motivation educators and teachers need to be aware of the motivational conditions identified by psychologists and also have an insight into the ways boys learn in order to modify the classroom context to meet boys' learning needs.

According to Cecco and Shaw (2008), three sets of motivational conditions identified by Dornyei (1994) have also been found useful for providing a framework for the classroom context. These are a) course-specific motivational components which relate to the motivational influence of the



syllabus, teaching materials, teaching methods and learning activities, b) teacher-specific motivational components which relate to the teacher-pupil relationship, the teacher's approach to the management of behaviour, the promotion of the sharing of ideas between pupils as well as between teacher and pupils and the provision of motivating feedback and c) group-specific motivational components which relate to the dynamics of the learning group, its participation in collaboration, its shared goals and shared norms of behaviour (Cecco and Shaw, 2008).

As far as how boys learn, Hannan (1996) offers an insight into the typical boy learner and cites the following characteristics. Boys are 'doers' first and 'thinkers' second, they have a shorter concentration span, they get easily bored, they have weaker listening and verbal skills as well as social and collaborative skills, they have less ability to organize and plan work, they are highly influenced by their peer group and they seek immediate gratification.

In the following paragraphs, by having in mind the reasons for boys' underachievement, the motivational conditions and the ways in which boys learn, various ways that could help raise their motivation shall be discussed. Although as has been discussed 'social' norms to a great extent seem to affect boys attitudes towards language learning, some steps could be made on the part of teachers in order to enhance boys' motivation and achievement.

According to Ofsted (2003), improving the achievement of boys is a complex matter in which interlinked factors play important parts including a positive learning ethos, good teaching and classroom management, close monitoring

of individuals and effective support for learning. Ofsted (2003) argues that these factors are significant in all schools and are relevant to girls as well as boys (OfSTED, 2003). It must be noted that the strategies suggested should not disadvantage the learning of girls but to incorporate them so that they enhance boys' participation and involvement.

Taken that boys underachieve in languages, due to the fact that they are considered to be feminine, teachers should encourage an atmosphere that would raise boys' will to participate. Boys perceive languages as feminine as they consider girls to be better at them and as the majority of them “ consider typical topics like wine, cooking and haute couture to be feminine in orientation” (Pritchard, 1987: 69) What can be done, therefore, is to provide challenging exercises and integrate materials that attract boys' attention such as articles, newspapers and comics (Noble and Bradford, 2000). As boys like challenge, challenging activities shall get them involved e. g. giving them team quizzes about the set texts and marry this with competition. Moreover, as boys tend to read non-fiction, including articles that involve sports, technology or hobbies would probably lead to more commitment to reading by boys. Increasing the choice of reading resources available in the language classroom is essential, as this would show consideration of boys' preferences. Diversity in the materials used is required to meet both the needs of boys and girls (Noble and Bradford, 2000).

Moreover, although language teachers are usually biased, they should not allow this to let them treat boys differently from girls. By devoting their attention to girls assuming boys are uninterested in the learning of the language would have indirect implications for boys' achievement as less

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attention would mean less language opportunities (Court, 2001). Even though studies (Spencer, 1998) have found that boys receive around 2/3 of teachers' attention during class much of it is negative as it arises from discipline problems appearing to receive less praise than girls (Harris, 1998). Harris argues that "insensitive feedback may serve only to foster the 'macho' image that 'boys are tough and you don't need to worry about hurting their feelings'" (Harris, 198: 61). Instead teachers should encourage the participation of boys into the lesson and praise them for their involvement without harming their 'image'. However, Harris (1998) suggests that due to the nature of peer pressure this should not always be praised in front of the class as it may not be seen as 'cool' but should also be done also on an individual basis either on an individual basis or positive comments on homework. Without it boys shall remain unmotivated, behave badly and produce poor quality work, becoming even more convinced that they are not good at languages and feel justified by making even less effort.

In addition, teachers should allow boys to do things rather than being more teacher-centered. According to Harris (1998), this would give them more flexibility to really adapt things to their way of learning. Graham and Rees (1995) suggest that boys need to have some sense of control because by learning what they feel they need to know in a way that is appropriate for them accelerates their learning (Harris, 1998).

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The Ofsted report 'Boys and English' (1993) concluded that boys' performance improves when they have a clear understanding of the progress they need in order to achieve (Harris, 1998). Harris (1998) suggests that <https://assignbuster.com/the-under-achievement-of-boys-in-language-learning/>

clear and explicit guidelines should be given to boys in order to help them progress and that it is not enough to offer pupils greater independence in their learning. Teachers should also equip them with the tools or strategies that will enable them to go about it. Nunan (1995) points out “ it is a mistake to assume that learners come into the language classroom with a natural ability to make choices about what and how to learn” (Nunan (1995), cited in Harris, 1998: 58). O’Malley and Chamot (1990) identify three types of strategies that the teachers should help the boys to develop; ‘ metacognitive’ strategies which deal with planning and evaluating learning, ‘ cognitive’ strategies which deal with grappling directly with the language itself and ‘ social and affective’ strategies through which the learner interacts with others or controls their own emotional response to the learning situation (Harris, 1998). According to Ofsted (1993), female students use more learning strategies than males and use them more often therefore it is important for teachers to intervene systematically with some strategy instruction to enable boys to develop their learning strategies (Harris, 1998). By developing these strategies boys shall be able to control their own learning. “ Rather than feeling that there is nothing they can do about their lack of success other than give up, it makes explicit what can be done to improve and locates the responsibility firmly on them” (Harris, 1998: 59).

In addition, we have noted earlier that boys tend to like audio-visual work. Incorporating the use of computers in the language classroom would not only be see