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## **THE EFFECT OF GENDER ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' VOCABULARY RETENTION REGARDING ETYMOLOGY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Gender has been regarded as an important affective factor influencing language learning (Gu, 2002). In many studies gender has been regarded as a variable in the use of language learning strategies (LLS). In this research, the effect of gender on vocabulary learning and retention regarding etymology has been investigated. For this purpose, 79 EFL learners studying Arabic Literature as their major within the age range of 22 to 30 of both males and females at Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Arak University, Iran, participated in this experiment. Their English language knowledge was determined by language proficiency test (Quick Placement Test, Version 2). Through administrating this test 60 students (35 females and 25 males) were homogenized and selected for the purpose of this study. Then the participants were given two researcher –made tests of vocabulary. The results of both immediate and delayed posttests demonstrated the efficacy of gender on vocabulary retention of EFL learners regarding etymology. In other words, the results of this research indicated that there is an interaction between gender and vocabulary retention via etymology, although it is not statistically significant.

**Keywords:** *Etymology; Gender; Vocabulary Retention; Vocabulary Learning Strategy*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Learning strategies has been examined as one means to make the development of SL/FL vocabulary knowledge easy (e.g., Schmitt, 2000; Nation, 2001). These learning strategies are intentionally or unintentionally learned techniques for processing information in order that learning, comprehension, and retention are enhanced (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Strategies are so important in language learning because they are the means for enhancing learner's autonomy and also learner's active, self-directed involvement being essential for improving communicative competence (Oxford, 1990).

According to Nation (2001), a large part of vocabulary is acquired with the use of vocabulary strategies and these strategies are useful for students being in different levels. He asserts that:

Most vocabulary learning strategies can be applied to a wide range of vocabulary and are useful at all stages of vocabulary learning. They also allow learners to take control of learning away from the teacher and allow the teacher to concentrate on other things. Research shows that learners differ greatly in the skill with which they use strategies. For these reasons, it is important to make training in strategy use a planned part of a vocabulary development program (2001).

One of these vocabulary learning strategies is the use of etymology. Etymology deals with the origin or derivation of words. Etymology refers to the story being behind each word, a list of older versions and variants of the vocabulary. Roots, suffixes, and prefixes are the basic elements in etymological approach. In this approach, learner learns about Latin and Greek prefixes, roots, and suffixes and can understand the meaning of unfamiliar English words by knowing their etymological structure, the building block from which they are evolved. This kind of knowledge causes learner to be able to construct many English words correctly knowing the roots, prefixes and suffixes by putting the building blocks together in the appropriate way and to recognize the meanings of variant English words never seen or heard before (Fekri, 2011; cited in Eliah, 2013). This knowledge also helps learners in remembering new vocabulary much longer than they can remember by only learning unrelated vocabulary lists.

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Zolfagharkhani and Gorbani (2011) stated that “Etymology knowledge enables learners to both deepen their present word knowledge and to understand unknown words encountered in the future”. Students are able to identify the meanings of word parts by the use of etymology approach, from which they can then recognize the meaning of the word. Since the large number of English words have been constructed through the combination of morphemic elements like prefixes, suffixes, and roots. Learners by knowing how to put morphemic elements can help to vocabulary growth.

One of the main factors influencing language learning is gender (Gu, 2002). In learning language a suitable number of studies concluded that gender can have an important effect on how students learn a language. And there are many researches done on topics about gender, involving" language learning ability, motivation, teacher perceptions, learning styles and strategies, classroom interaction, teaching materials, testing and pedagogies" (Zoghi *et al.*, 2013). Many studies examining gender as a variable in the use of language learning strategies (LLS) reported that there is a significant gender differences, and they show greater use of LLS by females (e.g. Green & Oxford, 1995; Noguchi, 1991). And also according to Politzer (1983; cited in Zoghi *et al.*, 2013), social LS are used by females significantly more than males. Oxford and Ehrman (1995) argue that it is essential for teachers and researchers to understand and investigate gender differences and understand that gender differences may result in deeper differences of personality type and career choice. They also assert that" males and females should be encouraged and allowed to develop the most effective learning approaches they can, and neither should be pushed into a gender-stereotyped set of strategies".

Jiménez (2003) regarding the role of gender in vocabulary learning strategies observed that females were superior to males quantitatively and qualitatively in using strategies. And females used a greater number of strategies and also a wider range of strategies than their male peers.

So teachers should notice to these differences and be aware of these differences between males and females in using strategies, at first the number of strategies used by them, and secondly the kind of strategies used by males and females.

In relation to the topic of gender differences in the use of the semantic fields, Meunier (1995/1996) and Yang (2001) concluded that male students were better than female students in acquiring vocabulary relating to geographical facts, and female students were better in acquiring vocabulary bearing story.

As it was said VLSs play a significant role in helping students to develop vocabulary skills and gender differences are obviously related to the differences between male and female 's use of VLSs. English language teachers should understand and be aware of the differences between females and males in using VLS and their improvement in vocabulary learning processes. For example, verbal repetition, cooperative learning oral and aural practices are not the vocabulary learning processes which male students are interested in as much as females and these processes might be useless and boring for them. However, practicing with visual connections and looking at real objects seem to be the vocabulary learning processes which male students are more interested in, and they seem to respond better with this learning process than female students (Boonkongsaen & Intaraprasert, 2014).

And also females were found to be better than the males in associating new information with previously-learned ones in order to retain knowledge of newly-learned information (Boonkongsaen & Intaraprasert, 2014) which the results of this research are in line with findings of the present study regarding the etymology as a kind of strategies relating the new information to the old ones being in cognitive structure (Ausabel, 1967) in order to have better retention.

According to Zolfagharkhani and Gorbani (2011), there is difference in learning vocabulary via etymology strategy in males and females ' performance and the finding of their research is in line with previous research findings.

There have been other researches somehow on the similar topic coming to the same point. In the study by Lee (2007; as cited in Madani & Azizmohammadi, 2009) with one of its objectives being "to examine if there is any gender difference in the use of strategy" he concludes that "no gender effect was found on the pattern and frequency of strategy use". The purpose of this study is to find out whether there is any significant difference between the performance of male and female learners in retaining vocabulary

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through etymology strategy or not. To meet the purpose of this study, the following research question was raised:

#### Research Question

Does the gender of Iranian EFL learners affect significantly their English vocabulary retention?

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Methodology

#### Participants

79 Iranian EFL learners (both male and female) majoring in Arabic Literature at Arak University were invited to participate in present study. The age of the participants ranged from 22 to 30 years old. Regarding the goal of this study, all the participants were given a test of English language proficiency (Quick Placement Test, Version 2) to determine their level of English proficiency. Through administering proficiency test 60 students consisting of 25 males (%41.7) and 35 females (%58.3) were homogenized and selected for the purpose of this study.

#### Procedure

A group of 79 Iranian EFL students (both male and female) majoring in Arabic Literature were selected. Firstly to make sure of homogeneity, the proficiency test that was first piloted with similar group was applied. The reliability of this piloting stood at .81 and it was confirmed that the test enjoyed suitable reliability. The results are given in Table 2. Then the administration of two different sets of researcher-made tests was done. The first set consisted of English words having Arabic root, and the second set consisted of English words having Middle English root. These researcher-made tests also were piloted with a similar group of ten students in order to ensure of reliability. At the piloting stage, the reliability of the tests was estimated through the KR-21 formula. The results are given in Table 1.

After piloting stage all the students were given a Test of English Language Proficiency (Quick Placement Test, Version 2). Through administrating this test 60 homogenous students (35 females and 25 males) were selected for the purpose of this study. Then the subjects were given two researchers –made multiple-choice tests. These tests were deemed as pre-tests.

These tests were consisted of 20 English words with different roots (10 English words with Arabic root and 10 English words with Middle English root) was given to the subjects. In these tests each item was accompanied by four definitions. The participants were supposed to choose one among the four options which corresponded to the suitable definition.

Then the participants received treatment (etymology instructions). On the sessions of treatment which each lasted about 20 minutes, all the EFL students knowing Arabic language as an additional language became familiar with etymology strategy, etymological knowledge, the concept of word formation, the story and history behind the root of each word, the significance of etymology and finally its role in vocabulary learning.

In order to see whether the treatment given to this group caused any significant change in this group, a posttest in the same format as the pretest was given to them. The words used in the posttest were those 20 words which were selected for the pretest and used throughout the treatment.

After 2 weeks interval (the appropriate interval for controlling the systematic change and practice effect), The participants were given posttests in order that the effect of etymological analysis on vocabulary retention to be examined. The delayed post-tests results were gathered and compared with those of immediate post-tests in order to check the retention of the words.

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the results of pilot study**

TEST	N	Mean	Reliability	Std. Dev
Vocabulary Test (ME)	10	3.6	0.81	2.87
Vocabulary Test (Ar)	10	4	0.77	2.70

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**Table 2: Statistics for the proficiency test**

TEST	N	Mean	Reliability	Std. Deviation
Quick Placement Test	30	9.3	0.68	4.32

*Instruments*

To accomplish this study, the following instruments were used:

*a) Language Proficiency Test*

In order to make sure of the homogeneity of all students in terms of general English Proficiency, the Quick Placement Test, Version 2 (QPT), was administered.

*b) Tests of Vocabulary in English Language*

Two sets of vocabulary tests having different roots being multiple-choice tests were given to the subjects. These tests were deemed as a pre-tests. Then the participants received treatment, after treatment there were immediate post tests and after two weeks the participants were given tests in the same format as the pretests and immediate post tests, these tests (test of words with Ar root and test of words with ME root) were called delayed post tests.

*c) Webster’s New World Dictionary*

The meaning, root and history behind each root of English word was available in this dictionary. For example:

**Jerboa:** [ **Ar. yarbu** ] a kind of mouse . **Tidy:** [ **ME. tidi** ] seasonable, honest, hence in good condition<tid[e]>neat in personal appearance, ways, etc.

*d) Arabic-Persian Dictionary*

The roots of English words being Arabic ones were examined in this dictionary. For examples:

**Jerboa:** [ **Ar.yarbu** ], a kind of mouse

**Minaret:** [ **Ar.manarah**, of lamp<base **nar**,fire ]

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

*Test Normalization*

Due to the fact that the statistical procedure used in this study required the normal distribution of gathered data, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov was run to confirm the normality of distribution (see Table below). So table of One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test (table 3) indicated that nearly all variables because of having p-value being greater than .05 enjoy normal distribution.

**Table 3: One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test**

	pre.test. Ar	post.test.Ar	delayed.t Ar	pre.test. ME	post.test. ME	delayed.t ME
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	1.063	1.658	1.452	1.352	1.189	1.195
p-value	.208	.008	.030	.052	.118	.115

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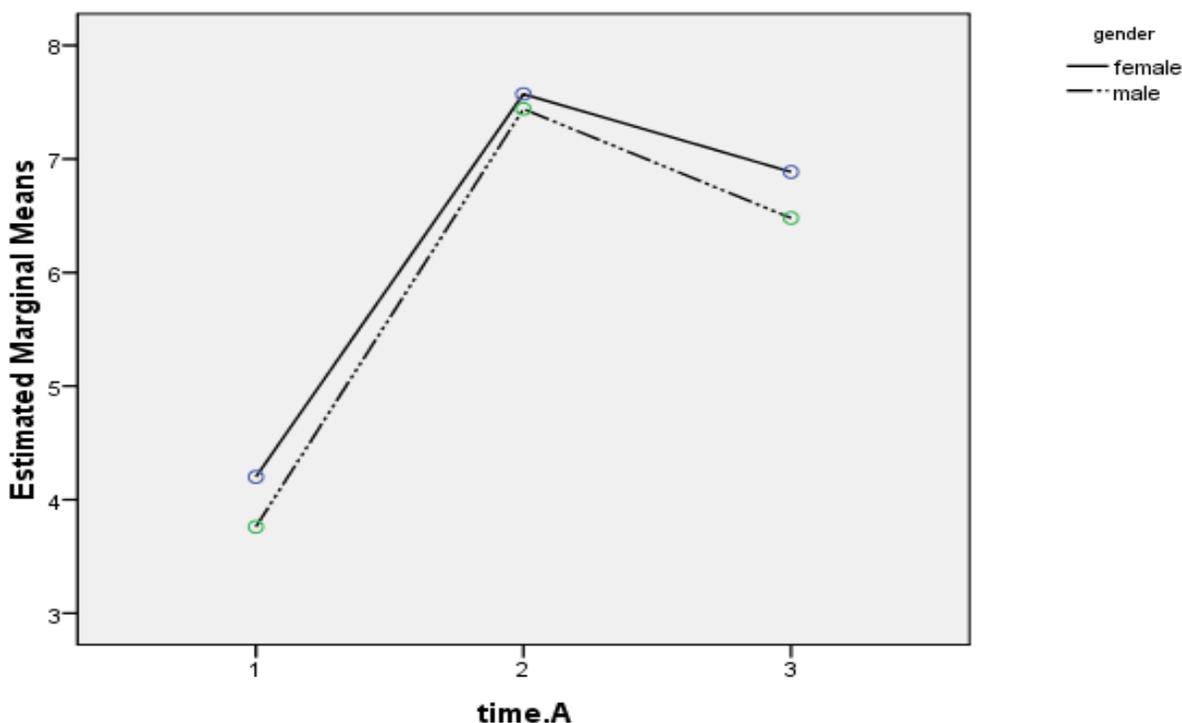
**Descriptive Statistics for Vocabulary Test with Arabic Root (Ar)**

Table 4 demonstrates the descriptive statistics (Mean and Std. Deviation) on pretest, immediate posttest and Delayed posttest regarding the gender (male and female).

**Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Vocabulary Test with Arabic Root**

	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Pre.test.(Ar)	female	4.20	1.937	35
	male	3.76	1.234	25
	Total	4.02	1.682	60
Immediate Posttest (Ar)	female	7.57	2.118	35
	male	7.44	1.758	25
	Total	7.52	1.961	60
Delayed Posttest(Ar)	female	6.89	2.398	35
	male	6.48	1.558	25
	Total	6.72	2.084	60

The means regarding gender (male and female) have been shown separately in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1: The means of males and females' scores on 3 different occasions (pretest, immediate and delayed posttest)**

For doing test, initially, the hypothesis should be checked. In Sphericity Test with its results in table 5 indicated below, it is investigated that whether correlation coefficient within repeated measure are totally equal with each other or not? Because of p-value =0.01, So there is not enough reasons for correlation equality and for answering the main question, it means, the equality of means of scores in three times, the latter table named test of Within Subject Effect, the Greenhouse-Geisser row, should be used.

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**Table 5: Mauchly's Test of Sphericity<sup>b</sup>**

Measure:MEASURE_1						
Within Subject s Effect	Mauchly's W	Approx. Chi-Square	df	Sig.	Greenhouse-Geisser	Epsilon <sup>a</sup> Huynh-Feldt Lower-bound
timeAr	.855	8.947	2	.011	.873	.914 .500

*b. Design: Intercept + gender  
 Within Subjects Design: time.Ar*

Noticing to following table (Table 6) and p-value which is smaller than 0.05(p-value<0.05), we conclude that the mean of scores has been changed significantly during the time. In fact time is an affective factor. And also the degree of this effect is 0.70 which is very high (Partial Eta Aquare=70), it means 70% of model's exact is because of this variable and with holding this variable and omitting other variables like gender only 30% of model 's exact has been decreased. The interaction effect between time and gender is not significant one (p value>0.05) and the results of following table indicates that the learners 'scores are nearly equal on three occasions within males and females 'subgroups and there is no significant difference between them (see Figure 1 indicating two graphs being parallel).

**Table 6: Tests of Within-Subjects Effects**

Measure: MEASURE_							
Source		Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
time.Ar	Sphericity Assumed	396.923	2	198.462	137.937	.000	.704
	Greenhouse-Geisser	396.923	1.746	227.292	137.937	.000	.704
	Huynh-Feldt	396.923	1.827	217.247	137.937	.000	.704
	Lower-bound	396.923	1.000	396.923	137.937	.000	.704
time.Ar * gender	Sphericity Assumed	.834	2	.417	.290	.749	.005
	Greenhouse-Geisser	.834	1.746	.478	.290	.719	.005
	Huynh-Feldt	.834	1.827	.457	.290	.729	.005
	Lower-bound	.834	1.000	.834	.290	.592	.005
Error(time.Ar)	Sphericity Assumed	166.899	116	1.439			
	Greenhouse-Geisser	166.899	101.286	1.648			
	Huynh-Feldt	166.899	105.969	1.575			
	Lower-bound	166.899	58.000	2.878			

And also noticing to Figure 1 illustrated before and the following table, we can say that the means of scores in both males and females firstly raised and then fell. Perhaps it can be said that raising manner firstly was because of etymological treatment and falling manner after that was because of time interval.

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In this stage and Table 7 illustrated below, the mean of scores and 95% confidence interval relating to males and females can be seen.

Totally, the mean of females ' scores is higher than that of males, as it was clear from Figure 1 illustrated before.

**Table 7**

Estimates				
Measure:MEASURE_1				
gender	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
female	6.219	.280	5.658	6.780
male	5.893	.331	5.230	6.557

Table 8 indicates that gender variable has not significant effect on learners ' vocabulary learning and retention (because P-value = 0.45 >0.05).

However the means of scores of females on 3 occasions were higher than the males. The degree of gender effect is %1 which is not significant.

**Table 8: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects (Ar)**

Measure:MEASURE_1						
Transformed Variable:Average						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Intercept	6418.553	1	6418.553	779.187	.000	.931
gender	4.641	1	4.641	.563	<b>.456</b>	<b>.010</b>
Error	477.775	58	8.238			

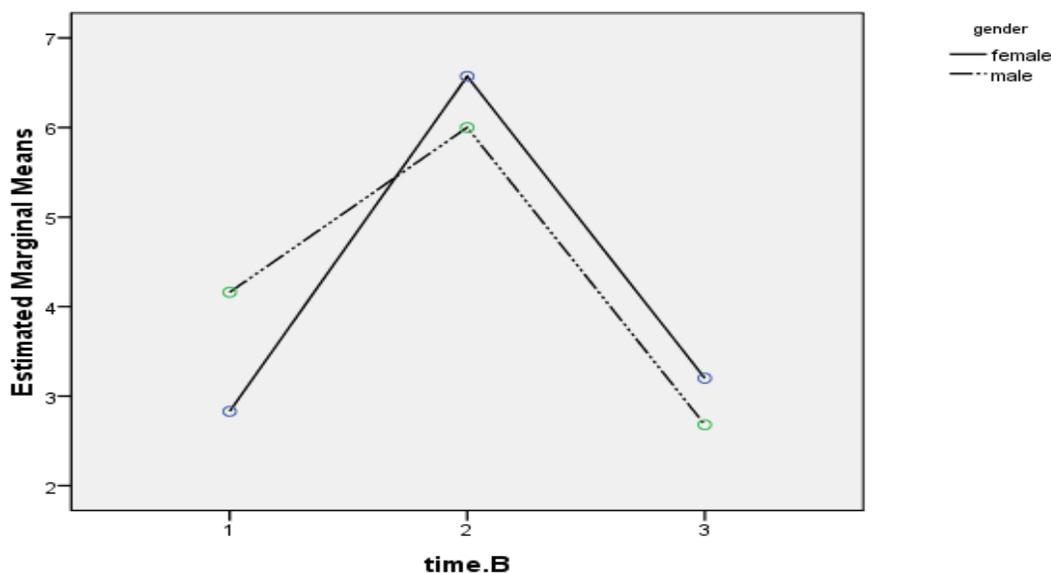
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**Descriptive Statistics for vocabulary test with Middle English Root (ME)**

Table 9 shows the descriptive statistics (Mean and Std. Deviation) on pretest, Immediate posttest and Delayed posttest regarding the gender (male and female) for vocabulary test with Middle English root (ME).

**Table 9: Descriptive Statistics for vocabulary test with Middle English Root (ME)**

	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Pre.test.(ME)	female	2.83	2.216	35
	male	4.16	2.055	25
	Total	3.38	2.233	60
Immediate Post.test(.ME)	female	6.57	2.062	35
	male	6.00	2.160	25
	Total	6.33	2.105	60
Delayed Posttest (ME) .	female	3.20	1.471	35
	male	2.68	1.626	25
	Total	2.98	1.546	60



**Figure 2: The means of males and females' scores on 3 different occasions (pretest, immediate and delayed posttest)**

The results of following table (Table 10) indicate that although the means of scores are equal on pretest and delayed posttest (time 1 and time 3), but there is statistically significant difference between the means of scores on pretest and posttest (time 1 and time 2) and also on immediate posttest and delayed posttest (time 2 and time 3). The results of Table 10 indicate that students because of time interval and not being familiar with the root of vocabulary have rather the same means on pretest and delayed posttest (time 1 and time 3). So there was not any improvement in vocabulary size and retention in both males and females.

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**Table 10: Pairwise Comparisons**

Measure:MEASURE_1						
(I) time(MA)	(J) timeM	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig. <sup>a</sup>	95% Confidence Interval for Difference <sup>a</sup>	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	2	-2.79*	.302	.000	-3.395	-2.187
	3	.55	.285	.056	-.016	1.124
2	1	2.79*	.302	.000	2.187	3.395
	3	3.34*	.197	.000	2.951	3.741
3	1	-.55	.285	.056	-1.124	.016
	2	-3.34*	.197	.000	-3.741	-2.951

Based on estimated marginal means

\*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

a. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Least Significant Difference (equivalent to no adjustments).

In this stage and table below, the mean of scores and 95% confidence interval relating to males and females can be seen (Table 11).

**Table 11: Estimates**

Measure:MEASURE_1				
gender	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
female	4.200	.264	3.672	4.728
male	4.280	.312	3.655	4.905

As you noticed, Table 8 indicates that gender variable in vocabulary test with Ar root has not significant effect on learners' learning and retention, because P-value = 0.45 which is greater than 0.05. However the means of scores of females on 3 occasions were higher than the males (see Table 3 and Figure 1).

The degree of gender effect is %1 which is not significant (Table 7).

Therefore, the hypothesis stating that the gender of Iranian EFL learners can affect significantly their vocabulary retention regarding etymology strategy can be rejected (see the Table 8).

There have been other researches being on somehow the same topic which are in line with the results of this study.

In the study by Lee (2007; as cited in Madani & Azizmohammadi, 2009) with one of its objectives being "to examine if there is any gender difference in the use of strategy" he concludes that "no gender effect was found on the pattern and frequency of strategy use". But as it is clear from Table 4 and Figure 1 there is difference between the means of scores of males and females totally, and on immediate and delayed posttest females outperformed the males in vocabulary learning and retention via etymology (Test with Ar root).

Although this difference is not statistically significant, but this difference between the means of scores of males and females on immediate post test and delayed posttest can be because of the females more use of strategies than the males, and these findings are in line with findings obtained by Boonkongsan & Intaraprasert (2014), stating that "females reported employing VLSs significantly more frequently than their male counterparts in overall VLS use" (among a lot of strategies only one type is used by males). The first reason for explaining these differences refers to the innate characteristics of female and male

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brains." Females and males are of equal intelligence; however, they are likely to operate differently as they seem to use different parts of their brains to encode memories, sense emotions, solve problems and make decisions" (Zaidi, 2010; as cited in Boonkongaen & Intaraprasert, 2014). According to Zaidi (2010): certain characteristics in the brain play important roles in female and male learning processes and language development. Regarding the regions of the brain that play important roles in visual processing and storing language and personal memories, apart from being bigger in volume, the frontal and the temporal areas of the cortex are more precisely organized in female's brain. This contributes their better language learning and predisposes female students as a whole to be more strategic vocabulary learners than their male counterparts.

Another reason for explaining these differences refers to the female and male cognitions. "Males and females have different cognitive profiles" (Baron-Cohen *et al.*, 2005; as cited in Boonkongaen & Intaraprasert, 2014). "Concerning a visual link to learning, male learners tend to rely more on pictures and moving objects for word connections than female learners" (Gurain, 2006; as cited in Boonkongaen & Intaraprasert, 2014).

Gurain (2006) stated: One VLS which is directly related to visual connections is, '*Looking at real objects and associating them with vocabulary items to retain knowledge of newly-learned vocabulary item.* Not surprisingly, it was found in the present study that male students reported employing this VLS significantly more frequently than their female counterparts.

On the other hand, it was found that females in associating newly-learned vocabulary with previously-learned ones in order to retain newly-learned vocabulary items were to be better than the males and their findings are in line with findings of the present study regarding the etymology as a kind of strategies relating the new information to the already ones being in cognitive structure (Ausabel ' meaningful learning, 1967) in order to have better retention.

And also Jiménez (2003) investigated that females were superior to males in using strategies quantitatively and qualitatively regarding the role of gender in vocabulary learning strategies. In other words, females used a large number of strategies and also a wider range of strategies than their male peers.

According to Zolfagharkhani and Ghorbani (2011), males and females ' performance in learning vocabulary via etymology strategy is different from each other and females used a greater number of strategies than their male peers, and the kind of strategies used by females is different in males and the finding of their research is in line with previous research findings.

### **Conclusion**

To test the hypothesis, the related data was analyzed, the results of which indicated that gender variable has not statistically significant effect on participants ' learning and retention, because p-value is 0.45 and is greater than 0.05( $p\text{-value}=0.45>0.05$ ). But as it is clear from Table 4 and Figure 1 there is difference between the mean scores of males and females totally, and on immediate and delayed posttest females outperformed the males in vocabulary learning and retention via etymology. But this difference is not statistically significant. Therefore, the hypothesis stating that the gender of Iranian EFL learners can affect significantly their vocabulary retention regarding etymology strategy can be rejected (see the Table 8). The findings of the present study indicate that there is an interaction between the gender and vocabulary learning and retention regarding etymology, although it is not statistically significant. So "Gender is an issue with important theoretical and pedagogical assumption in L2 learning" (Zoghi *et al.*, 2013). Gender has been regarded as an important affective factor influencing language learning (Gu, 2002). Oxford and Ehrman (1995) assert:

Teachers and researchers should keep trying to understand gender differences and should understand that gender differences may often be a mask for deeper differences of personality type and career choice. They also assert that "males and females should be encouraged and allowed to develop the most effective learning approaches they can, and neither should be pushed into a gender-stereotyped set of strategies". And also regarding the role of gender in vocabulary learning strategies, teachers should be aware of the differences between males and females in using strategies, especially the number of strategies used by

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them, and secondly the kind of strategies used by males and females and not to push them towards using the special strategies. Like any other study this research has certain limitations. The individuals participating in this study were only 60, not being enough to confidently generalize the results. Researcher did not have enough time for trying different kinds of strategies to recognize what will best suit their particular students regarding gender, because the number of strategies and the kind of strategies used by females is different in males. The participants for this study consisted of college students majoring in Arabic literature; a new study could use participants' of diverse age groups knowing additional language (Arabic language or any other languages) and diverse majors (in different settings). The participants in this study were adolescent learners, so the results of this study cannot be generalized to other age groups. This study focused merely on one group knowing an additional language (Ar), but it is hoped that further research will study the role of etymology in different groups knowing different additional languages (i.e., Fr, Ger and Turk.) in learning English language as Foreign language.

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