

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE AND THEIR IMPACT ON ENGLISH LEARNING STRATEGIES

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Abstract

This study examines gender differences in English communication among university students, focusing on reluctance to speak with the opposite sex, opinion expression, classroom participation, group work preferences, and language improvement strategies. The research aims to explore how gender influences students' confidence and participation in English learning. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through questionnaires, class observations and interviews. The study applies Lakoff's (1975) theory on gendered language and Tannen's (1990) framework on communication style differences. The findings reveal that female students hesitate to speak English with male peers more than male students do. Female students prefer written expression, whereas males favour verbal communication. Additionally, female students tend to remain passive in class, while males actively participate. In terms of group work, female students favour same-sex collaboration, whereas males prefer mixed-gender teams. Regarding language improvement, female students believe they learn better through same-sex interactions, whereas males favour opposite-sex practice. These differences suggest that confidence, social norms, and classroom dynamics significantly impact English learning. The study highlights the need for gender-responsive teaching strategies to ensure equal participation and enhance students' language skills.

Keywords: *Gender, Communication, Teaching strategies*

I INTRODUCTION

Gender roles, shaped by society and culture, play a significant role in various aspects of life. According to UN Women (2020), these roles can be seen in politics, where women strive for equal rights, and in the household, where they work to reduce inequality and unfairness. In politics, for instance women continue to advocate for equal representation and decision-making power, challenging traditional male dominated structures. Within the household, gender roles often determine responsibilities and expectations, with women frequently working to overcome inequalities and expectations, with women frequently working to overcome inequality and unfair treatment in caregiving and domestic tasks. Gender roles also influence how men and women use language to communicate. Lakoff (1976) introduced the notion of women's language, which argued women's lower social status and was characterized by features such as. the use of tag questions, lexical hedges or fillers, rising intonation on declaratives, precise colour terms, empty adjectives, intensifiers, avoidance of strong swear words, polite forms, hypercorrect grammar, and emphatic stress.

Other studies on language and gender also reveal the difference between men and women in using language in communication. Ali (2023), for instance, found that female participants employed a broader range of politeness strategies, including negative and off-record politeness, whereas male participants predominantly used positive politeness. This suggests that women tend to use more varied and indirect politeness strategies in certain contexts. Lakoff (1976) argued that women tend to follow the rules of politeness, conversational implicature, and interpersonal exploration, whereas men tend to focus on the rules of conversation and more direct, factual communication. Similarly, Field (2021) asserts that women use more positive politeness strategies when speaking with the same sex peers, whereas men do not exhibit this tendency. Moreover, Devi (2024) confirms that women are more comfortable using nonverbal communication such as eye contact, gestures, smiles, personal space, touch, and interpretation of nonverbal cues, than verbal communication. The result was drawn from a qualitative study and observation analysis of mixed-gender interactions in both formal and informal settings. This study analysed participants use of nonverbal behaviours and found that women consistently demonstrated sensitivity to and reliance on nonverbal cues for conveying emotion and maintaining interpersonal harmony. These findings suggest that women may prioritize relational aspects of communication with sociolinguistic theories that associate female communication styles with empathy and social connectedness.

Gender differences in communication styles can reinforce gender inequality, particularly in institutional and professional contexts. Holmes (2006) finds that women tend to use language that fosters connection and collaboration, often employing hedges, tag questions, and polite forms to

maintain interpersonal harmony. Brescoll (2016) further demonstrates that women who express strong emotions, such as anger are often penalized in leadership evaluations, whereas men displaying the same behaviour are perceived as more competent. These patterns of misperception contribute to the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, as their communication styles are judged not on effectiveness but on conformity to gendered expectations of authority. Tannen (1990) further explores these differences, as summarized in table 1:

Table 1. Tannen (1990) Men and Women Style of Communication

Men Communication Style	Women Communication Style
Use language to assert their status and independence	Use language to foster relationships and create connections with others
Directness, assertiveness, and competitiveness	Use questions
Likely to interrupt others,	Seek consensus
Make declarative statements	Express empathy and support

Tannen (1990), explores gender differences in communication by suggesting that men and women grow up in distinct sociolinguistic subcultures, leading to different conversational styles. Cameron (1998) and Talbot (2010) argue that Tannen's difference approach may essentialize gender and overlook the role of power, context, and intersectionality in communication. Tannen's framework remains a useful starting point for exploring how gendered socialization can influence interactional styles, especially when considered alongside more critical, power perspectives. For example, a woman may ask a question to seek agreement or build a connection, but a man might see it as a challenge to his authority. Likewise, a man's direct statements may seem aggressive or dominating to a woman, even if that wasn't his intention. Tannen suggests that both women and men can practice active listening skills to reduce misunderstandings and improve communication in interpersonal relationships (Ahmad, 2024).

Studies on gender differences in language and communications have been conducted in various fields, including culture, religion, language, and economics. These interdisciplinary approaches highlight the complexity and multifaced nature of how gender shapes linguistic behaviour and communication styles. Nadia (2024) argues that studying language and gender in education can help teachers develop effective lesson plans. By recognizing how gender influences students' communication patterns, participation styles, and learning preferences, teachers can design lesson plans that cater to diverse classroom needs and foster equal engagement for all learners (Montero-SaizAja, 2021). Furthermore, recent studies by Kheder & Rouabhia (2023) found that gender-based differences in language use not only affect communication styles but also significantly impact learning strategies, and identity information. Their study highlights that male and female learners often adopt different approaches to language learning, shaped by societal expectations, classroom experiences, and individual confidence. For example, female students may prioritize accuracy and organization in language use, while male students might be more inclined toward risk-taking and spontaneous speech. These differences reflect broader social and cultural influences on how learners perceive themselves and their roles in communication.

In English teaching, male and female students communicate differently, which may affect their learning experience. Logan (2009) found that female students performed better in reading comprehension, read more frequently and had more positive attitude to reading and school (Pelletier et al., 2024). Marantika (2022) explains that gender and learning styles influence each other, as some students use multiple learning styles to access information. This suggests that teachers should consider student's dominant learning styles when planning lessons, incorporating diverse strategies to match learning objectives. This study examines how gender differences in language and communication influence students' strategies in learning English.

II METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach. Zohrabi (2013) describes qualitative research as a method that focuses on how people interpret their experiences to better grasp social realities (Gupta et al., 2024). This approach was deemed appropriate to gain in-depth insights into students' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours related to language learning and gender. Data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and open-ended questionnaires. Each method was chosen to triangulate findings and ensure credibility. First interviews, aimed to explore students learning preferences and interactions experiences. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Next is observations were conducted over the English-Speaking class, took notes, focusing on classroom interaction patterns, turn-taking, group formation and politeness strategies. Last, open-ended questionnaires were distributed to all participants after the interviews to further explore their perceptions. This study explores English learning strategies among seventh-semester students in the English Literature Department at Bumigora University. There are 2 classes, each class consisted of 30 students. For purposive sampling, this study only took 20 students including 10 males and 10 females, was selected. Data were gathered through interviews and questioners to understand how gender differences influence students' learning strategies. Respondents were asked about their comfort levels in speaking English with the opposite sex, their preferred methods of expressing opinions (writing or speaking, their preference for working in single-sex or mixed-sex groups, their classroom participation tendencies, and their views on strategies for improving English skills in relation to gender differences.

III FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 RELUCTANCE TO SPEAK ENGLISH WITH THE OPPOSITE SEX

The study found a noticeable disparity in how male and female students perceive English communication with the opposite sex. A significant 70% of female students expressed reluctance to engage in English conversations with male students, while only 20% of male students reported feeling hesitant to speak English with their female peers. These responses were further explored during interviews, where several female participants elaborated that they felt more confident when speaking in single-sex groups, as they perceived the environment to be more supportive and less intimidating. Male students tended to downplay their reluctance, claiming there was "no difference" in their ability to communicate in English, regardless of gender. The first data collected through open-ended questionnaires and interviews, the data gather student's responses related to communication preferences, reluctance to speak English with the opposite sex. These themes were then summarized in Table 2, which presents the most frequently mentioned reasons for students' reluctance to speak English with the opposite sex. The reasons for reluctance are shown in table 2:

Table 2: Students Experienced Reluctance to Speak English when Interacting with Individuals of a Different Sex

Females Reason	Males Reason
Hard for male to understand	Fear of making mistakes
Fear of misunderstood	Desire to maintain a masculine image
Males are open	Nervous around females
Males are judging	Fear of misinterpretation
Lack of confidence	
Limited practice opportunities	
Stereotypes language ability	

Interestingly, responses from the questionnaire revealed that 80% of male students reported finding it more enjoyable to converse in English with their female peers, whereas only 30% of female students stated that they comfortable speaking English with male students. These findings suggest that social or cultural factors, such as norms around gender interactions, may influence students' confidence

levels in using English. To explore these differences further, interviews were conducted. Female students frequently expressed feelings of self-consciousness when speaking English around male peers, citing fears of making mistakes and being judged. Reluctance can potentially impact students' English practice and speaking proficiency development. Understanding these differences is crucial interventions that promote equitable participation and confidence in language use across gender. For female students, their hesitation to speak English with male counterparts may stem from societal norms and expectations that place greater pressure on women to conform to certain standards of behaviour, including modesty or fear of judgment. They feel self-conscious about making mistakes in front of male students, who may be perceived as more confident or critical. On the other hand, male students' lower reluctance and higher enjoyment of speaking English with females influenced by a sense of confidence often encouraged in men within mixed-gender interactions. Additionally, some male students may find cross-gender communication more engaging or less intimidating due to a lack of societal pressure. These factors contribute to the observed differences in attitudes toward English communication between genders.

3.2 PREFERENCES OF EXPRESSING OPINIONS

The next aspect is students' preferences in expressing their opinions. The preferences for expressing opinions in English varied significantly between male and female respondents, highlighting distinct communication tendencies. From the questionnaire found students preferences when expressing their opinions. Here are some of the reasons of student's preference in expressing their opinion shown in table 3 below:

Table 3: Students' Preferences in Expressing Their Opinions

Females Reason	Males Reason
Desire for precision and organization	Confidence in verbal communication
Fear of mistakes	Lower concern for mistakes
Low confidence in speaking skills	Assertive and sociability
Introvert and shy	Less emphasis on perfection

Responses to the second questions in questionnaire revealed that 70% of male students preferred expressing their opinions verbally in English. In contrast, only 20% of female students shared this preference, indicating that most female respondents were less comfortable in speaking English to articulate their thoughts. The majority of female students 80% showed a strong preference for expressing their opinions through writing rather than speaking. This preference could form of communication, allowing them more time to carefully organize and present their thoughts. In comparison, only 10% of male students favoured writing over speaking, suggesting that they might feel more comfortable with the spontaneity and fluidity of verbal communication. The remaining respondents from both groups exhibited no clear preference, opting to express their opinions through either speaking or writing based on the context of situation. This contrast between male and female students underscores differing comfort levels and strategies when using English to communicate their ideas.

Male and female students have different communication styles, cognitive techniques, and social expectations, which contribute to their variations in opinion expression. Female students enjoy writing because it allows them to examine and reflect on their ideas before sharing them. Holmes (2006) highlights that women tend to adopt more careful and sensitive context of communication styles, especially in situations where they perceive potential for misunderstanding or criticism. Similarly, Baxter (2010) emphasize that women often feel more comfortable communicating in environments where they can reflect and revise, such as in written forms. These findings align with this study, which shows that female students are more likely to contribute thoughtfully through written tasks than in oral discussion.

3.3 PREFERENCES FOR GROUP WORK

Next is female and male students exhibited different preferences regarding group work, whether in single-sex or mixed-sex groups. Data found in questionnaire revealed gender-based differences in

students group work preference. The majority of male students which is 70% preferred working in mixed-sex groups, while only 20% of female students shared this preference. In contrast, male students preferred this arrangement. This suggests that female students feel more comfortable collaborating with same-gender peers, while male students are generally more open to mixed-gender teamwork. Here are the reasons for male and female students' preferences regarding group work show in table 4 below:

Table 4: Reasons Female and Male Students Preferring of Group Work

Preference	Reasons for Female Students (prefer Single-Sex Groups)	Reasons for Male Students Reason (Prefer Mixed-Sex Groups)
Comfort	Feel more comfortable and relaxed and relaxed working with same gender peers.	Feel comfortable in mixed gender settings and enjoy diverse interactions.
Fear of Judgement	Worry about making mistakes or being judged by make peers.	Less concerned about being judged for their opinions or mistakes.
Communication Style	Prefer open discussions without interruptions from male students.	See mixed gender groups as an opportunity to learn different perspectives.
Gender Roles and Expectation	Feel expected to take supportive roles in mixed groups, reducing confidence.	Confident in taking leadership roles and guiding discussions.
Competition vs Collaboration	Prefer cooperative and supportive environments with female peers.	Enjoy competitive and dynamic discussions in mixed gender groups.
Encouragement from teacher	Receive less encouragement for mixed gender collaboration.	Lecturer encourage male students to participate in mixed gender groups.

3.4 PREFERENCES TO BE ACTIVE OR SILENCE IN CLASSES

Students' participation preferences in English classes were explored through the questionnaires and further elaborated during interviews. The study found that female students were more likely to remain silent, with 70% preferring a passive role in English classes, while only 20% of male students exhibited the same behaviour conversely, 65% of male students preferred to be active participants, engaging in discussions, answering questions, and contributing more frequently in class. The remaining students from both groups had no fixed preference, switching between active and passive participation depending on the context of the lesson or activity. These findings suggest that gendered socialization and classroom dynamics may influence students' willingness to speak up and actively participate in English classes. Here is the table 5 shows to compare the participation preferences of female and male students.

Table 5: Student's Preference to be Active or Silent in Classes

Reasons for Female Students Prefer to be Passive	Reasons for Male Students Prefer to be Active
Worry about grammar and pronunciation errors.	Less concerned about mistakes and focus more on communication.
Feel less confident in their spoken English.	More confident in speaking spontaneously even with errors.
Reserved or introverted, avoiding speaking up.	Willing to engage and initiate conversations.
Feel that male students dominate	Taking leadership roles and steering

discussions.	discussions.
Receive less encouragement from teachers to participate.	Lecturers call on male students more, reinforcing their participation.

3.5 PREFERENCES IN IMPROVING STUDENTS' ENGLISH SKILL THROUGH INTERACTIONS

This finding emerged from the questionnaires, where students were asked about their preferences for improving English skills through interaction. The responses showed that 85% of female students believed they could enhance their English more effectively when working or speaking with same-sex peers. They associated these settings with greater comfort, support, and reduce anxiety. In contrast, 75% of male students expressed that interacting with the opposite sex helped them improve their English skills more effectively, citing increased motivation and a more dynamic atmosphere. These preferences were further explored during follow-up interviews, where female participants commonly noted feeling more relaxed and confident in same-sex groups, while male students described mixed-gender interactions as stimulating and engaging for language practice. Table 6 below shows the reasons for male and female students' preferences in improving their English.

Table 6: Students Preference in improving their English Skill through Interactions

Reasons for Female Students (prefer same-sex interaction)	Reasons for Male Students (prefer opposite-sex interaction)
Feel more comfortable speaking with same-sex peer helps build confidence and reduces hesitation.	View interactions with the opposite sex as an opportunity to refine their fluency and expression.
More collaborative and encouraging atmosphere when working with female peers.	Mixed-gender interactions help develop better communication skill.
Speaking with same-sex peers helps build confidence and reduces hesitation.	Interactions with opposite sex as an opportunity to refine fluency and expression.
More understand same-sex in communication style.	Speaking with the opposite sex introduces new vocabulary and perspectives.

Based on the findings in questionnaires above, the significant differences in how male and female students communicate in English are influenced by factors such as self-confidence, social norms, and classroom interaction patterns. The findings align with Lakoff (1975) and Tannen (1990), who argue that men and women have distinct communication styles shaped by social expectations. Female students had a higher reluctance. 70% of them spoke English with mixed-gender situations, whereas only 20% of male students reported feeling hesitant when talking with the opposite sex. In line with Lakoff (1975), women's speech is often more polite, hesitant, and cautious, reflecting a concern for correctness and social approval. On the other hand, male students exhibited greater confidence, with many downplaying their reluctance by stating that gender did not affect their speaking ability. This suggests that men may have a stronger sense of assertiveness in communication, which Tannen (1990) describes as part of their tendency to seek status and dominance in conversations.

Conversely, male students generally showed greater confidence when communicating in English, regardless of group composition. Some explicitly stated that gender did not influence their communication behaviour, downplaying any potential discomfort. This reflects Tannen's (1990) view that men often engage in conversation to assert dominance, compete, or maintain status, which can make them appear more assertive or bold in classroom discussions. Their tendency to take risks and initiate speech more frequently aligns with traditional masculine communication norms that value competitiveness and control. These insights underscore the importance of acknowledging and addressing gender-based communication differences in the classroom. By creating supportive, inclusive learning environments, educators can help all students-regardless of gender-build the confidence needed to communicate effectively in English.

The findings found notable differences in classroom participation. The data show that 80% of female students reported a preference for passive participation in class, while 65% of male students expressed a preference for active participation. This suggests a gender-based contrast in classroom behaviour, with female students more likely to remain silent and male students more inclined to speak up. These patterns may reflect gendered communication norms and social expectations. According to Holmes (1995), women tend to use facilitative speech rather than competitive discourse, which may explain their reluctance to dominate classroom discussions (Jayastu, 2024). Female students based on interview responses, expressed concern about making mistakes or being negatively judged, particularly when speaking in front of male peers, whereas male students appear more comfortable taking risks and engaging in spontaneous discussions. On the other hand, Tannen (1990) suggest that men often perceive conversation as a form of competition, while women may see it as a way to connect and build relationships. This competitive framing may encourage male students to dominate discussions or be less inhibited by the prospect of making errors. In this context, male students' greater comfort in speaking up may be reinforced by social norms that reward assertiveness and verbal dominance in men. These findings also highlight how gendered socialization and communication styles can influence participation in language learning environments, the importance of creating inclusive classroom strategies that empower all students to engage confidently.

Additional variations were identified in students preferred methods of communication and the tendencies between male and female students in expressing their thoughts. The majority of male students (70%) favoured verbal expression, whereas 80% of female students preferred written communication. This finding aligns with (Erbeli & Rice, 2021), which suggests that men are more likely to engage in direct and spontaneous verbal exchanges, while women prefer structured, well-thought-out responses. The preference for writing among female students suggests a desire for greater control over language, allowing them to carefully organize their thoughts before expressing themselves.

Group work preferences also revealed a gendered divide. The study revealed notable gender differences in group work preferences. Data from the questionnaire showed that a majority of male students (70%) preferred working in mixed-sex groups, while only 20% of female students shared this preference. This indicates that female students may feel more comfortable collaborating with same-sex peers, whereas male students are generally more open to mixed-gender teamwork. These findings align with Tannen (1990) highlights that women often seek rapport-building interactions, whereas men are more inclined toward competitive and status-driven communication, which could explain these preferences (Pace-Sigge, 2024).

Last, perceptions of the best way to improve English skills also varied by gender. Female students believed that speaking with same-sex peers was the most effective method, while male students preferred practicing with the opposite sex. Female students may associate same-sex interactions with a safer and more supportive learning environment, reducing the anxiety of making mistakes. Meanwhile, male students feel that speaking with female peers helps them refine their fluency and enhance social pressure to conform linguistically, whereas men tend to experiment with language more freely.

The findings confirm that gender plays a crucial role in shaping students' confidence, participation, and communication preferences in English learning. From the interviews provided rich insights into how male and female students experience communication and group work differently, complementing the qualitative data from questionnaires. Female participants consistently expressed a preference for cautions and structured communication, often emphasizing their comfort in same-sex groups. Several female students mentioned feeling more supported and less judged when interacting with peers of the same gender. For instance, one female student explained, *"When I speak with other girls, I don't feel pressured. We listen to each other and help correct mistakes, so I feel safer to express my thoughts in English."* This suggests that same-sex group settings create a safer environment for female students, allowing them to participate more freely without fear of criticism.

Female interviewees also described mixed-gendered interactions as intimidating or challenging. Some shared feelings of self-consciousness or anxiety about misunderstood or judged by male peers. One of student stated *"In mixed groups, I sometimes hold back because I worry that boys might think I'm not good enough or that I will make mistakes"*. This indicates that social and cultural expectations about gender roles may influence female students' communication preferences and confidence level.

On the other hand, male students interviewed generally displayed greater confidence and more relaxed attitude toward mixed-gender communication. Several males described enjoying mixed groups because they saw these interactions as opportunities for lively discussion and friendly competition. For example, one male student said *"I don't really feel different when talking to girls or boys. It's more stout sharing ideas and challenging each other"*. Another remarked, *"working with girls makes the class more interesting and pushes me to participate more"*.

These interview findings highlight clear gendered differences in communication styles and preferences. Female students tend to prioritize harmony, safety, and structured interaction, while male students are more comfortable with spontaneous and competitive engagement across genders. This understanding can guide educators to create more supportive spaces that encourage participation from all students regardless of gender.

Complementing these self-reported insights, classroom observations provided concrete evidence of how these gendered communication patterns manifest in practice. During the observations conducted in English classes, it was found that female students were noticeably less vocal in whole-class discussions compared to their male peers. Female students tended to remain passive, contributing minimally or only directly prompted by instructors. Their participation often reflected caution, possibly stemming from fear of making mistakes or social judgment. Meanwhile, male students actively engaged by volunteering answers, asking questions, and leading discussions, demonstrating higher comfort levels with spontaneous verbal interaction.

The questionnaires, interview data, and classroom observations further confirmed that female students were less active in group discussions, particularly when working with male peers. They were more likely to take notes, listen attentively, or contribute only when prompted. In contrast, male students tended to initiate conversations, volunteer answers, and display greater comfort in speaking English in front of the class. These behavioural patterns suggest that gender influences not just how students perform and engage in real classroom context.

Additionally, observations during group activities supported the preference trends identified in interviews. Female students generally preferred collaborating within same-sex groups, where they felt safer and more supported. Male students, however, were more open and confident in mixed-gender group settings, often assuming leadership roles or driving conversations. These observational findings reinforce and expand upon the interview data, providing a comprehensive understanding of how gender influences communication, participation, and confidence in English classroom.

Female students tend to be more cautious, prefer structured communication, and feel more comfortable in same-sex groups, while male students are generally more confident, active, and open to mixed-gender interactions. These patterns reveal important gendered communication styles that influence participation and confidence in the classroom. Understanding these gendered communication styles can help educators develop more inclusive, gender-responsive teaching strategies that foster participation and confidence among all students.

IV CONCLUSION

The study found significant gender-based variations in students' English communication preferences, participation, and confidence levels. It indicates that female students consistently demonstrated greater reluctance to engage in spoken English, particularly during mixed-gender interactions. This hesitation was evidence in both questionnaire responses and classroom observations. Female participants expressed a preference for structured, non-verbal forms of communication, such as writing, where they felt more in control and less exposed to judgment. In contrast, male students showed a higher degree of comfort and willingness to participate in verbal interactions, often taking initiative in class and expressing their opinions freely. These preferences align with Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, (2013), which suggest that women often prioritize accuracy and organization in their speech, whereas men are more inclined to speak without hesitation. Additionally, Aliakbari (2011) found that female EFL learners tend to prefer visual, tactile, and kinaesthetic learning styles, indicating a preference for structured and organized learning environments. This supports the observation that female students favour structured communication and same-sex groups. Furthermore, the data showed that students' perceptions of how to improve their English skills were also influenced by gender. Most female students believed that practicing English with same-gender peers was more effective, while male students favoured interaction with the opposite sex, which they perceived as more stimulating or motivating. These patterns suggest that gender plays a crucial role not only in communication style but also in shaping learners' engagement and performance in English classroom. By acknowledging these gendered tendencies, educators can adopt more inclusive, gender-responsive teaching approaches. Creating safe and supportive learning environments such as offering balanced groupings, encouraging diverse participation strategies, and being mindful of gendered communication needs can help ensure all students feel confident and empowered to participate. Addressing these disparities is essential for promoting equitable language learning opportunities and fostering a classroom culture that values different communication styles and learning preferences.

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