

## **GENDER DIFFERENCES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING**

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***Abstract-** This article focused on the gender differences in English Language Learning. It discovers students' learning styles as affected by the notions about men's and women's differences in communication. The data were randomly collected from ten male and ten female students of the English department of Tanjungpura University Pontianak. The population was the third-semester students of English department students. They were given an online questionnaire through Google Form. It is to find out their attitudes towards speaking to a different gender, strategy to express an opinion, group work preferences, and activeness/passiveness in the class. The findings showed some factors affect the different styles of female and male students in learning English. The result of the data indicated that more females felt reluctant to speak English to a different gender. Besides, it can also affect the successful strategies of English students in learning English. The great potency of female students to be ashamed, nervous, and women's language can affect their achievement in English. Meanwhile, male students as influenced by their need to challenge and maintain strength as men and can use speaking English ability as a way to show their status as men.*

***Keywords:** gender differences, male and female students, English language learning*

### **INTRODUCTION**

A human is a communicating organism that uses language to communicate. Without language, a human might not survive because they will not be able to associate with others. Language is used to communicate among members of society. It is a means to express the tradition and values of a group feature (Sirbu, 2015, p.405). When someone starts to communicate with another and there is a response, that is called a dialect or conversation. Generally, there are two styles of using language since humans have two genders called male and female. In everyday conversation with members of the other sex people may or may not be aware of the differences between males and females. Men and women interact in daily life as social beings. Thus, creating differences in the interaction activity (Irawan & Triandjojo, 2017, p.34)

As socially and culturally constructed, gender differences are one of the interesting phenomena in contemporary society related to the characteristic, the style of using language and communication. Men and women are different in their ways of communication, and therefore they should be treated differently. Irawan & Triandjojo (2017, p.35) study that men and women are different in their politeness and their choice of words. The women use standard and polite words while the men use harsh and impolite words to communicate. Besides, Wahyuningsih (2018, P.89) finds out that men and women have differences in forms, contents, and uses in communication. The study shows that men are more directive and use plain words while women are more expressive and polite in using language. In short, gender has its characteristics in using language and style of communication.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This discourse had been seriously and creatively debated since Lakoff (1976) and Tannen (1990), in their study on English-speaking countries, illuminated the concept of women's language which highlights the existence of men's and women's differences in communication. One characteristic of women's language as stated by Lakoff (1976) is the great tendency of women in using lexical hedges or fillers (e.g. *you know, sort of, well, you see*), tag questions (*she's very nice, isn't she?*), rising intonation declarative (*it's really good*), empty adjectives (*divine, charming, cute*), precise color terms (*magenta, aquamarine*), intensifiers (*just, so*), hypercorrect grammar (consistent use of standard verb forms), super polite forms (indirect requests, euphemisms), avoidance of strong swear words (*fudge, my goodness*), and emphatic stress.

Gender differences mean men and women that are specific to a particular culture and influenced by its attitudes and practices. Another difference is that women are more passive than men. If they are talking, they tend to show that they are not sure about what they are saying. The passiveness and tentativeness of women in communication are affirmed by Rahmi (2015). Conversely, men are represented as leaders and breadwinners. Furthermore, in some cultures women take the name of their husbands after getting married, sons have more freedom to play outside the house, and daughters must stay at home and take care of younger ones.

Women are different from men not only in verbal communication but also in nonverbal communication. One study by Sud et al (2019) looked at women to be better leaders. At this stage of the evolution of human society, women seem to have some advantage in the power dynamics caused by nonverbal communication. It explores various nonverbal behaviors like appearance, gestures, facial and eye expressions, silence, proxemics, kinesics, haptics, paralinguistics, chronemics, oculusics, vocalic, and others.

Tymson (1998, p.8) classifies differences between men and women in communication as seen in Table 1:

**Table 1. Male and Female Style of Communication**

<b>Male Style</b>	<b>Female Style</b>
<i>Focus on information</i>	<i>Focus on relationship</i>
<i>Report style of speaking</i>	<i>Rapport style of speaking</i>
<i>Goal driven</i>	<i>Process-oriented</i>
<i>Single-task approach</i>	<i>Multi-task approach</i>
<i>Succinct language</i>	<i>The storytelling style of speech</i>
<i>Working towards a destination</i>	<i>On a journey</i>
<i>Need to know the answers</i>	<i>Want to ask the right questions</i>

These differences in men’s and women’s communication may affect expectations for men and women in various fields of life. The different ways of men and women in communicate can become a critical point of gender inequality. Because of those differences, men and women are treated differently. Sugihartono et al (2007: 35) state that sex and gender are two different things. But still interrelated. In general, gender is defined as individual differences based on biological factors brought about by birth, namely the differences between male and female sex, while gender is a psychosocial aspect of men and women. This means that gender is psychology aspect in women and men, an aspect that can influence their behavior or their aptitudes.

Gender is referred to variously across areas of social science (Rahmi, 2015, p. 81). The expression “gender” has more than one valid definition, where the meaning of the word can be related to the context. However, all definitions have one common thread, “gender” refers to a wide set of characteristics that are seen to distinguish between male and female entities, extending from one’s biological sex to, one’s social role.

Gender difference can be assumed as an individual difference generally existing and catching attention in foreign language teaching and learning (Gustafsson Sendén,

Bäck, & Lindqvist, 2015). “Gender” is more appropriate for distinguishing people based on their socio-cultural behavior including speech. Then, “sex” refers to categories distinguished by biological characteristics (Holmes, 2013, p.159). It can conclude that gender refers to socially constructed roles, behaviors, and attributes considered appropriate for men and women in a given society. The reference to “sex” is the biological category.

According to Muin (2019) sociolinguistics studies how language is used in its society, and why and to what extent a certain language is related to society. Sukarno (2015) stated from sociolinguistics, that people have known some definitions, terms, and issues related to the nature of language in the society in which it is used. Therefore, the language is used in a social context. It can be used in the communication of daily life. Everybody should communicate with other people. For example, males speak with a different gender. Likewise, females speak with the same gender even different gender.

Gender can be identified from a linguistic perspective as well. In this context, gender refers primarily to the classification of nouns into a gender class that, in most languages, consists of three gender categories; masculine, feminine, and neuter. It is typical for articles and adjectives to take different forms to “agree” with the gender of the noun. For example, the agreement between a *boy* and *his* is based on the relationship involving the male entities. In this language, gender is essential for constructing sentences and communication.

Other research on language and gender also reveals the differences between men and women in using language for communication. One of them is that women are more polite than men. Nurjanah (2017) notes that when talking with the same sex peers, women will use many positive politeness strategies. On the other hand, men in similar circumstances do not show this tendency. Lakoff (1976, p.74) also states that women tend to speak concerning the rules of politeness, conversational implicature, and interpersonal exploration whereas men tend to speak concerning the rules of conversation and straight factual communication.

This result was consistent with Manzoor et al., (2020) and Jeong, Feng, Krämer, Miller, & Marsella (2017) who revealed similar findings. It might be because of the gendered tendency in terms of social gender anticipation and the occupation tendency. In addition, most people believe that work concerning language is more suitable for

females. Correspondingly, Leavy, (2018); Mutlu et al., (2019), and Hedges, Borgerhoff Mulder, James, & Lawson (2016) once remarked that one of the main reasons why females attain greater success in foreign language learning is that they generally have stronger positive emotion, and this emotion reflects their anticipation of employment seeking. It relates to the belief for girls that a foreign language has a more important professional value to them, while boys do not think in similar ways.

Another gender study on language learning belongs to Rahayu (2016), the findings of the study show that there are important gender differences in the use of language learning. Female students also tend to use overall language learning strategies more often than males, especially with affective and metaphysic strategies. Thus, gender could be one of the important things that should be paid attention to related to language.

The research titled *Male vs Female EFL: Who is Better in Speaking English Skill?* by Nira Erdiana, Syamsul Bahri Ys, and Cut Nurul Akhmal (2019). The study was conducted to investigate whether or not female EFL students' ability in speaking skills is better than male students. They concluded that the differentiation by gender in learning English, especially speaking skills. A study by Azhar and Iqbal (2018) on the classroom of different departments argued that taking class discourse turns was dominated by certain gender; Faizah and Kurniawan (2016) study on interruption and overlap concluded that female speakers initiated more than males did.

In the area of English Language Teaching in which female and male students interact with each other by using English for their communication, problems caused by men and women's differences in using language may be affecting. Severiens and Dam (2005) studied the close relationship between gender differences and learning styles and found that men were more likely than women to prefer the abstract conceptualization mode of learning. Another study by Lestari (2018) found that male and female teachers implied four types of politeness strategies depending on context and situation. The result of this study showed that female teachers used positive politeness as the dominant strategy, while male teachers used bald on record as the dominant strategy.

It is interesting to discuss how gender differences in language and communication are practiced in different areas. Practices in language and gender may also vary in a particular society or group. That is why the researcher chose the topic of

gender because many varieties and differences when students learn English between female and male students, especially in communication.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This article was conducted to find out the gender differences in students' learning English. Thus, in this study, the researcher used the descriptive qualitative method to find a deeper understanding related to learning objectives. Kim (2017) proposed that qualitative descriptive research produces data that elaborates the 'who, what, and where of events or experiences from a subjective point of view. Creswell (2012) stated that a qualitative research study is needed to explore this phenomenon from the perspective of distance education students". Sutopo explained in Cahyaningsih (2017) that the purpose of descriptive research is to express and describe the qualitative data or information accurately and also includes the analysis and interpretation of that data.

### **Data Collection**

This article was based on data collected from English Department students at Tanjungpura University Pontianak. The population of the paper was the third-semester students of the English Education study program. For the sampling, the researcher just took 20 students from class A: 10 male students and 10 female students.

The respondents were given an open-ended questionnaire, such as online questionnaires through Google forms to reveal their perceptions regarding their strategies in learning English as affected by gender differences. The questionnaires were directed to find out whether or not the students feel reluctant to speak English with different gender, what ways they prefer to express their opinions either indirect (writing) or direct way (speaking), and what kinds of groups they prefer to work with either single-gender group or mixed-gender group, whether the students prefer to be active or not (silent), and how the students' perception on the strategies to improve English skills dealing with gender difference. The questions were addressed to the respondents individually through Google Form.

The questionnaires are as follows.

1. Do you sometimes feel reluctant to speak English with another gender? Explain!
2. In an English class, what way do you prefer to express your opinions, written or oral form? Explain!
3. In a group discussion, which one do you prefer, working with the same gender or different gender? Explain!
4. In an English class, do you sometimes choose to keep silent or active? Why?
5. Do you think working with the same gender or different gender can make your English better?

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed by using qualitative analysis. The researchers used Google form as the tool for collecting the data. The researcher generated the questions mainly about their preferences in gender to communicate in English, reluctance in speaking with different gender, preferences in expressing opinions, and preferences of being active. The results were explained descriptively about gender differences.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Findings**

According to responses to the questionnaires, the researcher found the phenomenon regarding the students' perception of the strategies to improve English skills dealing with gender difference which elaborated as follow:

#### **Students' Reluctance to Speak English with Different Gender**

The first observed aspect was whether the students feel reluctant to speak English with a different gender. Of the whole population, there were more female students than male students who felt reluctant to speak English to a different gender. There were 80% of female students who felt reluctant to speak English to male students whereas only 50% of male students felt reluctant to speak English to female students. Male students also neutralize their reluctance by saying that no difference at all, in which they could communicate using English well to both genders. Of the rest of the male respondents 50% felt more enjoyable speaking English with their female counterparts. Some of them stated that different thoughts between women and men

create a good idea or opinion. It is different from female students in which only 20% of them were not reluctant to speak English with their male counterparts. Their reasons can be seen in the following table:

**Table 2: Students' Reasons to Feel Reluctant to Speak English with Different Gender**

<b>Females' Reasons</b>	<b>Males' Reasons</b>
Not being free to express	Females get offended easily
Not good in English	Only if females are smarter
Ashamed to make mistakes	Feeling shy to females
Afraid to communicate with males at all	Nervous
Males sometimes speak rough	Not convenient
Males are difficult to understand	Not free to express

### Students' Preferences in Expressing Opinions

Based on two important productive skills in English, writing and speaking, as the way to express their opinions in English, each female and male respondent had different preferences. There were more male students (60%) than female students (80%) who preferred uttering their opinions. On the other hand, 20% of female students and 40% of male students preferred writing to speaking to express opinions. Their reasons for expressing their opinions either in written or oral form can be seen in Table 3.

**Table 3. Female Students' Reasons for Expressing Opinions**

<b>Females' reasons to choose writing</b>	<b>Females' reasons to choose to speak</b>
More comfortable conveying the thoughts in writing	Direct to the point
No confidence to speak	Could express clearly by gesture, facial expression, and body language
Afraid to make ungrammatical when speaking something	The easiest way to express the opinion

**Table 4. Male Students' Reasons for Expressing Opinions**

<b>Males' reasons to choose writing</b>	<b>Males' reasons to choose to speak</b>
Writing will give time to breathe and to think about the appropriateness of the words chosen.	It takes no time in expressing things
Writing has a broader chance of getting fewer mistakes	Could show the ability to speaking
Feel free to write anything	Feel free to speak

Based on Table 3 and Table 4, the researcher concluded that female students chose to speak English to convey their opinions by using their gestures, body language, and facial expressions. It is one of the simplest ways for them to voice their ideas. Then, more male students preferred to write English to communicate their assumptions.



### **Students' Preference in Working with Groups**

In working with a group, female and male students also had different preferences, either single or mixed-gender groups when it came to group projects. The single group refers to individuals of the same gender, such as females. Whereas, the mix-gender group works with people of different genders, such as males and females. In this research, males (50%) chose to work with mixed-group, while others chose to work with mixed-group. Besides, the female students preferred working with single-group (60%) whereas there were only 40% of female students preferred workings with mixed-group. Female students chose to work with a single-gender group that an ed-gender group. Then, male students preferred working with the mixed-gen groups.

There are some reasons for male students working with a single-gender group, such as similar thoughts to express something, being more cooperative, and the easiest way to build good teamwork. On the other hand, different gender had a different thoughts. It got every perspective when discussing things. Female students preferred working with a single-gender group, they built a cooperative team and got a similar way of thinking. Besides, they chose to work with different gender because they could see a different point of view and had better insights.

### **Students' Preference to be Active or Passive in English Class**

In English language learning, the students tend to be active in the class because it can improve their speaking skills. Based on the online questionnaire, some students tend to be passive because they want to get more vocabulary first and then they will explore or improve it by themselves. From the answer to the online questionnaire, 20% of the female students liked to keep silent and the male students only 30%. Then, the rest of the female students 80% tend to be active and try to develop their skills. Of the male students, there were 70% who are being active in the class. The reasons for being active and silent in English class can be seen in Table 5 as follows:

**Table 4. Activeness and Passiveness of Female and Male Students**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Active</b>	<b>Passive</b>
Female students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Could improve the confidence</li><li>• Good cooperation</li><li>• Improve speaking ability</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hear others' perspectives first</li><li>• Afraid to make mistakes</li><li>• Not confident, not moody, nervous, ashamed</li></ul>
Male students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Showing the expression</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Talk less do more</li></ul>

	through gesture, mimic, and intonation • Being confident in class • Showing ambition and aspiration	• Less vocabulary • Afraid to make mistakes
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**Discussion**

According to the findings, it is found that female and male students have different strategies for learning English. Tymson (1998) categorized the distinction between male and female communication styles. As indicated in Table 1, both female and male students were constrained by their perceptions of their counterparts. Female students, felt reluctant to speak with male students because sometimes male students were rough and difficult to understand. Female students also thought that male students were arrogant in delivering opinions or ideas. Besides, male students felt reluctant to speak English with female students due to the reason that females get offended easily. Sometimes female students were talkative and selfish. For both female and male students was mostly caused by their self-confidence in speaking skills. They were not confident and afraid to make mistakes with their English speaking skill. Therefore, they were nervous and ashamed of making pronunciation errors in front of different gender in English class. It caused less freedom to express their English ability.

Moreover, the result of the data indicated that more females felt reluctant to speak English to a different gender. This finding is supported by Nurjanah (2017), it explained about females will frequently employ politeness when conversing with their similar gender. Speaking English to the same gender was more effective than speaking to a different gender. Conversely, males speaking to either the same or different gender were similar because male students wanted to know more knowledge from a different gender. In fact, they could also enjoy talking to female students. This shows that gender differences influence the tendency of female and male students to speak to a different gender. Feeling reluctant to speak to different gender female students indicates that they are not confident and are nervous. This may give a vital impact on the students' freedom to speak English. Less freedom made them less powerful showing their inferior position.

In terms of the productive skills to choose to express opinions, the data also show different patterns. Female students preferred to choose speaking as the way to

express their opinion in English in order to show the gesture, mimic, and intonation through speaking. On the other hand, 60% of male students chose to speak as an effective way of expressing opinion effectively regardless of their lack of English. In fact, male students considered speaking as a way to show their English ability. This also shows the great effects of gender differences in the strategies chosen by female and male students to express their opinions. Females' higher tendency to express their opinion by speaking performance which becomes one indicator of women's language based on Janet Holmes (2013) in the discussion of Gender and Age.

The study also indicated the different tendencies of female and male students in working with groups. 40% of female students preferred working with the single group whereas male students 50% preferred working with the mixed single group. As shown in Table 5, females thought that working with a single group made them more confident as they could easily control their emotions. Talking to a single group made them easier to reduce some psychological problems due to their limited English skills. For example, being ashamed of making mistakes in pronunciation. However, male students felt enjoyable when they were working with a different group and also a single group (male). In fact, working with the same gender was not challenging for them. This also shows the impact of gender differences on their strategies for learning English. Different preferences in working with groups indicate their learning styles as affected by gender differences. Males' preferences in working with different gender show their tendency to challenge the differences in a more dynamic situation whereas females tended to be more monotonous showing their less confidence and less certainty.

Another fact differentiating female and male students in English learning is their tendency to be active or to be passive in the English classroom. This is very important in the English classroom as their strong activity in the class will contribute much to their English proficiency, especially in speaking. There were 80% of female students tend to be active because most of them were talkative in class. Moreover, male students were 70% who liked to be active. This shows the activeness of female and male students in studying English. As indicated in Table 4 above, the activeness of male students was influenced by their need to know and do more, to show ambition and aspiration as men, or to show off. In fact, they considered that that was their nature to be active.

Conversely, female passiveness was mostly influenced by their less confidence as women.

The characteristics can be found in the learning styles of female and male students as observed above. These differences could be caused by different perceptions of men's and women's styles in communication. Females thought men were arrogant whereas males thought females were emotional. These views may be due to differences in men's and women's views about the conversation. According to Nurjanah (2017), women see conversations as a way to develop and preserve intimacy, while for men conversations are negotiations to achieve and maintain power. It can be seen from the findings, that female students tend to be active and speak in English class. Therefore, the female students were more talkative than the male students.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this paper, the writer has discussed the possible impact of gender differences in language and communication on the ways female and male students learn English. It is revealed that differences in the ways men and women communicate. The great potency of female students to be ashamed, nervous, and not certain, as characterized as women's language, can affect their achievement in English. For example, because they are ashamed, they cannot express their ideas in English although they are able to. This can be seen in the majority of the female students choosing writing as the way to express their ideas in order to get rid of those problems. Conversely, male students are influenced by their need to challenge and maintain strength as men can use speaking English ability as a way to show their status as men.

The study only focused on gender differences in language learning. Therefore, it is suggested to get a more intensive observation of their learning in English by recording their conversations, to find out whether there are different patterns in their English expressions as well as their English achievement. For future teachers, the gender differences may know more about the characteristics of female and male students in learning English. More intensive observation is necessarily required in the future to find out other contributing factors influencing these differences of gender in language learning.

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