

LANGUAGE AND GENDER IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Murni Mahmud

(dwimurnye@yahoo.com)

Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia

Abstract: This paper highlights the impact of gender differences in English Language Teaching. It explores students' learning styles as affected by the notions about men and women differences in communication. The data collected in 2008 from 20 males and 20 females' English students of the State University of Makassar. It is to reveal their attitudes towards speaking to different sex, strategy to express opinion, group work preferences, activeness/passiveness, and their perception to increase English skills dealing with sex difference. It is revealed that female than male students were reluctant to speak to different sex; females preferred the direct way to express opinions (writing), work with the same sex, and tended to be passive in class. In addition, females saw the high possibility to increase their English skills by working with the same sex but the reverse is true for males. These different styles of female and male students in learning English were affected by the notions of women's language.

Key words: gender differences, women's language, single-sex group, mixed-sex group, same sex, different sex, English language teaching

Gender differences, which are socially and culturally constructed, are one of the interesting phenomena in contemporary society. Their impacts can not only be seen in political life, where women fight their political rights, or in households, in which women fight to reduce household harassment. Discourse on gender differences, in fact, also exists in the use of language for communication, highlighting that men and women are different in their ways of communication, and therefore they should be treated differently.

This discourse had been hotly 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 and women 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 on declaratives (*it's really good*), empty adjectives (*divine, charming, cute*), precise colour 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.

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. Hobbs (2003:243) 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 (1976:74) also states that 'women tend to speak with reference to the rules of politeness, conversational implicature, and interpersonal exploration whereas men tend to speak with reference to the rules of conversation and straight factual communication'.

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 Vanfossen (2001:2), who showed that women like using tag questions, (*It's really cold in here, isn't it?*), disclaimers (*I may be wrong but...*) and questions as directive statements (*won't you close the door?*). These kinds of phrases decrease the perceived assertiveness of speech.

In fact, women are different from men not only in verbal communication but also in nonverbal communication. One study by Griffin et al (1999) looked at the use of nonverbal communication: eye contact, gestures, smiles, personal space, touch, and interpretation of nonverbal cues, and found that 67.5 per cent of females establish more eye contact than men do; 75.5 per cent use more gestures than males and 83.7 per cent typically smile more often than a male does. This result shows that women are more comfortable using sensitive communicators than verbal communication.

Tymson (1998:8) classifies differences on men and women in communication as seen in Table 1:

Table 1. Male and Female Style of Communication

Male Style	Female Style
<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>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 on men and women communication may affect expectations for men and women in various fields of life. The different ways of men and women in communication can become a critical point of gender inequality. Because of those differences, men and women are treated differently. In terms of leadership, for example, women may be ignored for high position due to their emotional language. A study in the field of organization had shown that the capability of men and women to be a leader may be affected by the notions of emotional women's language, which is not suitable for a leader (Mahmud, 2008b, 2009c). Brass (1985:327-343) also confirms that in many organizations, 'differences in gender may be a surrogate for differences in job function, level in hierarchy, proximity, workgroup composition, numerical balance, and status'. Brass furthermore states that 'women have not acquired status and influence compatible to that of their male counterparts in organizations.

It is interesting to discuss how gender differences in language and communication are practiced in different areas. Eckert (1998:64) states that 'gender practices differ considerably from culture to culture, from place to place, from group to group, living at the intersection of all the other aspects of social identity'. Therefore, practices in language and gender may also vary in a particular society or groups.

In the area of English Language Teaching, in which female and male students interact to 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) had studied the close relationship between

gender differences and learning styles and found that 'men were more likely than women to prefer the abstract conceptualisation mode of learning'. Another study by Logan and Johnston (2009) found that 'girls had better reading comprehension, read more frequently and had a more positive attitude to reading and school' This shows that male and female have different learning styles which can be affected by differences in language usage as discussed in the discourse of language and gender. This article will also look at how gender differences in language and communication affect students' strategies in learning English.

METHOD

This research was based on the data collected in 2008 from the English Department students of the State University of Makassar. The population of the research was the fourth semester students of English Education study program which consists of three classes. Each class consisted of 35 students. For the sampling, the researcher just took 40 students among them randomly: 20 male students and 20 female students.

The respondents were given open-ended questionnaires 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 sex, what ways they prefer to express their opinions either indirect (writing) or direct way (speaking), what kinds of groups they prefer to work with either single-sex group or mixed sex 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 sex difference. The questionnaires are as follows.

1. Do you sometimes feel reluctant to speak English with another sex? 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 sex or different sex? Explain!
4. In an English class, do you sometimes choose to keep silent or active? Why? Is that because you are men or women?

5. Do you think working with the same sex or different sex can make your English better?

FINDINGS

This part provides the discussions of the questionnaires answered by the respondents regarding their strategies in learning English as affected by gender differences.

Students' Reluctance to Speak English with Different Sex

The first observed aspect was whether the students feel reluctant to speak English with different sex. From the whole population, there were more female students than male students who felt reluctant to speak English to different sex. There were 85% of female students who felt reluctant to speak English to male students whereas only 50% male students who felt reluctant to speak English to female students. Male students also had higher tendency to neutralize their reluctance by saying that no difference at all (30% students), in which they could communicate using English well to both sexes. In fact, the rest of the male respondents (20%) felt more enjoyable to speak English with their female counterparts. It is different from female students in which only 15% of them who 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 Sex

Females' Reasons	Males' Reasons
<i>Males are arrogant, like to show up</i>	<i>Females get offended easily</i>
<i>Not good in English</i>	<i>Only if females are smarter</i>
<i>Ashamed to make mistakes</i>	<i>Feeling shy to females</i>
<i>Afraid to communicate to male at all</i>	<i>Nervous</i>
<i>Males sometimes speak rough</i>	<i>Not convenient</i>
<i>Males are difficult to understand</i>	<i>Not free to express</i>
<i>Not being free to express</i>	

Students' Preferences in Expressing Opinions

Of the 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 (10%) who preferred expressing opinions in English. On the other hand, there were more female students (90%) than male students (25%) who preferred expressing opinions by writing than by speaking. The rest of them could choose either speaking or writing. Their reasons for expressing their opinions either with written or oral form can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Female Students' Reasons for Expressing Opinions

Females' reasons to choose writing	Females' reasons to choose speaking
Indirect way as less English capability	Willing to share ideas
No confidence to speak	More skilled in speaking
Shame, hesitation, afraid	Easy, direct, and faster to transfer ideas
Not very sure by speaking	Need to be more creative

Table 4. Male Students' Reasons for Expressing Opinions

Females' reasons to choose speaking	Males' reasons to choose writing
Clear, direct to the point	Easy to control and edit ideas
Effective and fast	Writing can minimize the speaking skill
Natural	Difficult to express ideas in speaking
Need to be recognized	Talk less do more
	Feel reluctant to speak

Students' Preferences in Working with Groups

Female and male students also had different preferences in terms of working with a group, either single-sex group or mixed-sex group. More males (65% students) than females (15%) preferred working with mixed-sex group. Most of the female respondents preferred working with single sex group (85% students) whereas there were only 15% of female students preferred working with the single sex group. The reasons for their decisions to choose either single sex group or mixed sex group can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5: Students' Reasons for Working in Groups

Working with	Males	Females
Males	Easy to control emotion; To get more freedom; Easier to understand; More cooperative; No limit	More responsible; more diligent; more talkative; more excited discussion; if women are smarter; women are more likely to agree and share; to show ability as men; to get new experiences; to be more active; women are more careful; more enjoyable
Females	The need to improve knowledge; more creative; good cooperation; difficult to interact; the need to overcome problems	Similar way of thinking; more concerns on feelings; more freedom; easy to share ideas; more serious; more open; more enjoyable; less emotion; more comfortable; more understanding; easy to manage things

Students' Preferences to be Active or Silent in English Classes

In English classes, female and male students also had different preferences, whether to be active or passive. It is revealed that more women liked to keep silent, which encountered 80% of the respondents, compared to only 15% of male students. The majority of male students preferred to be active (60% students), and the rest could choose either of them. The reasons for being active or silent in English classes can be seen Table 6.

Table 6: Students' Reasons for being Active or Silent

	Males	Females
Active	Influenced by status; to know more; talk less do more as men; to show ambition and aspiration as men; to show off; a nature to be active; to increase knowledge	No reason; depending on situation

Table Continued

Silent	Less vocabulary; not interested in the topic; not moody	More comfortable; ashamed; not confident; nervous; the topic is not interesting; not free to express as women; not sure; felt; not understand and not moody
---------------	---	---

Students’ Perceptions on Strategies to Improve English Dealing with Sex

To improve their English, male and female students also had different perceptions. There were 85% of female students who felt likely to improve their English if they were working or speaking with the same sex whereas for males, different sex was the best way to choose to increase English (75%). Some of their reasons can be seen in Table 6.

Table 7: Students’ Perception on Strategies to Improve English Dealing with sex

Same sex	Different sex
More discipline; more diligent; more accommodating; more reliable; get more knowledge for the same background; feel free to learn; no limit	Ashamed; not confident (if the opposite sex is smarter); for men, women are good inspiration to learn;

DISCUSSION

From the five points above, it can be seen that female and male students have different strategies in learning English. As indicated in Table 2, both female and male students were constrained by their perceptions about their counterparts. Female students, for example, felt reluctant to speak to male students because they thought that males were arrogant. Conversely, male students felt reluctant to speak English to female students due to the reason that females get offended easily. Other reasons for both females and males were mostly caused by their self confidence in speaking. They were not confident with their Eng-

lish skills, and therefore they were ashamed of making mistakes especially in front of different sex. This caused less freedom to express their English ability.

However, the data indicated that more females felt reluctant to speak English to different sex, 85% of females compared to 50 % of males. Females speaking English to the same sex was more effective than speaking to different sex. Conversely, males speaking to either the same or different sex would not bear any difference (30%). In fact, they could enjoy talking to females (20%). This shows that gender differences influence the tendency of female and male students to speak to different sex. Feeling reluctant to speak to different sex by female students indicates that they are not confident. This may give 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 writing as the way to express their opinion in English in order to avoid some obstacles they had such as their low confidence and low capability in English (90% of females compared to 60% of males). On the other hand, males saw speaking as the effective way of expressing opinion effectively regardless of their lack in English (60 % of males compared to 10% of females). In fact, male students considered speaking as the way to show their English ability and therefore, they could be recognized as men. 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 writing shows their passiveness, which become one indicator of women's language.

The study also indicated the different tendency of female and male students in working with groups. Female students (85%) preferred working with the single sex group whereas male students (65%) preferred working with the mixed sex group. As shown in Table 5, females thought that working with the single sex group made them more confident as they could easily control their emotion. Talking to the single sex made them easier to reduce some psychological problems due to their limited English skills, for example, being ashamed of making mistakes in pronunciation. Conversely, male students considered this high possibility when they were working with mixed sex. In fact, working with the same sex was not challenging for them. This also shows the impact of gender differences in their strategies in learning English. Different preferences in working with groups indicate their learning styles as affected by

gender differences. Males' preferences in working with different sex show their tendency to challenge the differences in 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 whether to be active or to be silent in English classroom. This is very important in English classroom as their strong activity in the class will contribute much to their English proficiency, especially in speaking. The study indicated that female students outnumbered male students who liked to be silent (80% compared to 15%). Conversely, male students were 60% who liked to be active. This shows the activeness of males and the passiveness of female students in studying English. As indicated in Table 9 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. In the literature of language and gender, being active or passive is one of the characteristics differentiating men and women's styles of communication. Biber and Burges (2000) show the tendency of women to speak less than men, particularly in mixed-gender settings.

Another important finding was their perception about the strategies to improve their English. It was revealed that 85% females would increase their English skills with the same sex whereas for males, 75% agreed that they could increase their English skills with different sex. This shows that for female students, working with the same sex is better than different sex because working with the same sex created more discipline, accommodating, and reliable conditions, so that they can be free to learn English. In that way, they can improve their English.

These findings supported the arguments on women's language showing men and women differences in communications. In relation to this, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1994:453) note that women's language is said to reflect 'women's conservatism, prestige consciousness, desire for upward mobility, insecurity, deference, nurture, emotional expressivity, connectedness, sensitivity to others, and solidarity'. On the other hand, men's language is regarded as 'evinced their toughness, lack of affect, competitiveness, independence, competence, hierarchy and control'. Biber and Burges (2000) further states that basically, the focus of conversations of men and women are different. Women fo-

cus on personal and interactional aspects of conversation, whereas men focus more on transferring information. Women are more tentative while men tend to be certain, using more persuasive strategies. The passiveness and tentativeness of women in communication are affirmed by Vanfossen (2001:2).

These characteristics can be found in the learning styles of female and male students as observed above. The high tendency for females to be passive and feel reluctant to speak to different sex is affected by their emotional and sensitive thoughts. Males' high confidence, on the other hand, is caused by their need to show up as a competitive, independent, and powerful people.

These differences could be caused by different perceptions on men and women style in communication. Females thought men were arrogant whereas males thought females were emotional. These views may be due to differences in men and women's views about conversation. According to Stanton (2001), women see conversations as the way to develop and preserve intimacy, while for men conversations are negotiations to achieve and maintain power. Generally, life for men is like a contest, a struggle to preserve independence. Therefore, women may tend to think of interactions in a non-hierarchical way while men typically view the world in a hierarchical way such that, during any interaction, one person is in a superior position and the other in an inferior position. According to Hassan (2000), women interact in ways that promote solidarity and equality, whereas men interact in ways which maintain and increase their power and status.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

In this article, I have 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 on the ways men and women communicate as discussed on the literature of gender, as promoted by Lakoff (1976) and Tannen (1990, 1994) can also affect the successful strategies of English students in learning English. The great potency of female students to be ashamed, nervous, 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 to choose writing as the way to express their ideas in order to get rid of those problems. Conversely, male students as influ-

enced by their need to challenge and maintain strength as men can use speaking English ability as the way to show their status as men.

However, these findings on 'women's language' are currently being contested. For example, Crawford (1995:34) argues that 'women's language cannot be adequately understood by counting features and assigning them to fixed categories of meaning'. This is because these differences may be relative and influenced by situational aspects. Connell (2002:51) also affirms that 'language use is situational and is shaped by relations of power.' To learn a language is 'a species characteristic which underpins the whole culture—including the ideology of gender difference'. As noted by Phillips (1980:541), 'gender differences in speech in our own society vary, depending on the social context of speech'. In Bugis society, for example, gender is an important aspect in men and women communication. However, some other aspects besides gender also take parts such as social status and age differences and also situations or the settings of conversations. In Bugis society, 'gender is not the sole factor influencing men and women's communication. Rather, social status for Bugis women in fact influences their gender performance in language' (Mahmud, 2008a, 2009a, 2009b).

It is suggested, therefore, to get more intensive observation on their learning style in English by recording their conversations, to find out whether there are different patterns in their English expressions as well as their English achievement. In addition, more intensive observation is needed to see other contributing factors influencing these differences. As stated by Phillips (1980:541), research on men's and women's speech should more effectively describe and explain 'the nature of variable relationships between communicative form and social function which can be done by more comparative research on gender differences in language use'.

REFERENCES

- Biber, D & Burges, J. 2000. Historical Change in the Language Use of Women and Men: Gender Differences in Dramatic Dialogue. *Journal of English Linguistics* 28: 21-37.

- Brass, D. J. 1985. Men's and Women's Network: A Study of Interaction Patterns and Influence in Organization. *The Academy of Management Journal* 28: 327-343.
- Connell, R. W. 2002. *Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press in Association with Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Eckert, P & McConnell-Ginet, S. 1994. Think Practically and Look Locally: Language and Gender as Community-Based Practice. In Camille Roman, Suzanne Juhasz and Cristanne Miller (eds.), *The Women and Language Debate*, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, pp. 432-460.
- Griffin, M.A., D. McGahee, and J. Slate. 1999 *Gender Differences in Nonverbal Communication*: Valdosta State University.
- Hassan, I.H. 2000. Language, Gender, and Power: Analysis of Theme and Topic Management in Arabic Conversational Discourse. *The Humanities and Social Science*, 61: 591.
- Hobbs, P. 2003. The Medium is the Message: Politeness Strategies in Men's and Women's Voice Mail Messages. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35: 243-262.
- Lakoff, R. T. 1976. *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Octagon Books.
- Logan, S & Johnston, R. 2009. 'Gender Differences in Reading Ability and Attitude: Examining Where These Differences Lie' *Journal of Research in Reading*, 32 (2): 129-214.
- Mahmud, M. 2008a. *Politeness in Bugis*. A Ph. D Thesis. Canberra: The Australian National University.
- Mahmud, M. 2008b. Bahasa dan Gender dalam Kinerja Organisasi (Language and Gender in Organizations). *Jurnal Administrasi Publik* Volume IV No 3 September 2008, published by Pusat Kajian dan Pendidikan dan Pelatihan Aparatur II LAN, Makassar.
- Mahmud, M. 2009a. Bahasa dan Gender dalam Masyarakat Bugis (Language and Gender in Bugis Society). *Jurnal Perempuan Online*, 14 January 2009.

- Mahmud, M. 2009b. *Language and Gender in Bugis Society*. Proceeding of Yearly International Linguistic Conference (Konferensi International Linguistik Tahunan), KOLITA 7 at UNIKA Atma Jaya, Jakarta, 27-28 April 2009.
- Mahmud, M. 2009c. *Bahasa Perempuan: Refleksi Gender dalam Kinerja dan Kepemimpinan Organisasi* (Women's Language: Its Reflection on Organizational Leadership). Proceeding of the National Seminar on Gender Perspective Leadership at the Center of Women Studies, Gadjah Mada University, 18 Juni 2009.
- Mahmud, M. 2009d. *Bahasa dan Gender dalam Masyarakat Bugis*. Makassar: Pustaka Refleksi.
- Philips, S. U. 1980. Sex Differences and Language. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 9: 523-544.
- Severiens, S & Dam, G. 2005. 'Speer, S.A. 2002. Sexist Talk: gender Categories, Participant Orientations and Irony. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 6(3): 347-377.
- Stanton, A. 2001. *Men and Women in Conversation: Finding a Way to Bridge the Gap*, University of Massachusetts. <http://www.healthandage.com/public/health-center/28/article/1284/Men-and-Women-in-Conversation-Finding-a-Way.html>. Accessed 10 July 2008.
- Tannen, D. 1990. *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. New York: Morrow.
- Tymson, C. 1998. *Gender Games: Doing Business with the Opposite Sex*. Australia: Tymson Communication.
- Vanfossen, Beth. 2001. *Gender Differences in Communication*. ITROW's Women and Expression Conference.