



*Gender Differences in Language Use Among EFL Students :
A Sociolinguistic Analysis*

**Perbedaan Gender dalam Penggunaan Bahasa Mahasiswa EFL :
Analisis Sociolinguistik**

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji perbedaan penggunaan bahasa berdasarkan gender di kalangan mahasiswa EFL dari perspektif sociolinguistik. Permasalahan penelitian berfokus pada bagaimana mahasiswa laki-laki dan perempuan berbeda dalam pola interaksi, strategi kesantunan, dan tingkat formalitas dalam komunikasi kelas bahasa Inggris, serta bagaimana norma sosial dan budaya memengaruhi perbedaan tersebut. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi pola variasi penggunaan bahasa berbasis gender dan menganalisis pengaruh konteks sosial terhadap perilaku komunikatif mahasiswa. Penelitian menggunakan desain kuantitatif deskriptif dengan instrumen kuesioner yang disebarluaskan kepada mahasiswa semester tiga Program Studi Bahasa Inggris dan Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris. Data dianalisis dengan mengelompokkan respons berdasarkan gender dan melakukan analisis komparatif terhadap aspek kepercayaan diri, gaya komunikasi, kesantunan, dan partisipasi kelas. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa laki-laki cenderung lebih langsung dan lebih aktif dalam diskusi, sedangkan mahasiswa perempuan lebih tidak langsung dan lebih mengutamakan strategi kesantunan. Namun demikian, norma sosiokultural dan konteks interaksi terbukti memiliki pengaruh yang signifikan, bahkan dalam beberapa situasi lebih dominan dibandingkan faktor gender semata.

Kata kunci: *perbedaan gender, penggunaan bahasa, mahasiswa EFL, sociolinguistik, interaksi kelas*

Abstract

This study investigates gender differences in language use among EFL students from a sociolinguistic perspective. The research addresses how male and female students differ in interaction patterns, politeness strategies, and levels of formality in English classroom communication, as well as how sociocultural norms influence these differences. The study aims to identify patterns of gender-based variation and examine the extent to which contextual and

cultural factors shape students' communicative behavior. A descriptive quantitative design was employed using a questionnaire distributed to third-semester students of the English Language and English Education Study Programs. The data were categorized by gender and analyzed comparatively to identify differences in confidence, communication style, politeness, and classroom participation. The findings indicate that male students tend to use more direct and spontaneous language and demonstrate higher participation levels, whereas female students employ more indirect expressions and stronger politeness strategies to maintain social harmony. However, the results also show that sociocultural norms and interactional context significantly influence language use, sometimes more strongly than gender alone.

Keywords: *gender differences, language use, EFL students, sociolinguistics, classroom interaction*

BACKGROUND

Language is not only a system of communication but also a social practice shaped by cultural norms, values, and social structures. In sociolinguistic studies, gender has long been recognized as one of the key variables influencing language use, interactional style, and communicative strategies. Differences in linguistic behavior between men and women are not merely biological but are socially constructed through roles, expectations, and power relations embedded in society. Previous studies have shown varying findings regarding gender-based language differences. Some researchers argue that women tend to use more polite and indirect forms, while men often adopt more direct and assertive styles. However, other studies indicate that such differences are highly context-dependent and influenced by social and situational factors.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, students are required to actively use English in both spoken and written forms, creating opportunities for sociolinguistic variation to emerge. Classroom interaction involves power relations, social hierarchy, and cultural expectations that may shape how male and female students participate and express opinions. Although several studies have examined gender and language use, limited research focuses specifically on EFL students within Indonesian higher education contexts. Therefore, this study seeks to explore how gender influences language use among EFL students and to examine the role of sociocultural norms in shaping classroom communication. This research is important to provide deeper insight into sociolinguistic dynamics in EFL settings and to support the development of more inclusive and effective instructional practices.

REVIEW TEORI

Gender-based inequalities in academic achievement have been the focus of numerous studies. Several studies indicate that in second language (L2) learning, females often demonstrate better performance than males. However, this advantage is not always supported by equal access to education. A survey conducted by Mujahid (2002) revealed that although many girls are admitted to elementary schools, the majority of them are forced to drop out when educational costs increase. Limited access to education for girls results from inadequate planning and insufficient governmental support for the education sector in Pakistan. Ensuring educational equality, however, is one of the government's primary responsibilities. In line with this, Choudhary and Rehman (2009) asserted that Pakistan remains one of the countries with a high level of gender inequality, where many families prioritize sending boys to school while girls are expected to focus on domestic responsibilities.

In addition to social and structural factors, scholars have examined gender differences from a biological perspective. Some researchers argue that women's superiority in verbal ability is more strongly influenced by biological or sex-based factors rather than socially constructed gender roles. Ali (2016) explains that there are general differences between men and women in terms of physical and biological development. Men are generally physically stronger, whereas women tend to have less muscle mass and a higher proportion of body fat. Nevertheless, women generally have a longer life expectancy and reach maturity earlier than men.

In studies of language use, findings related to gender differences have produced mixed results. Some recent research has failed to confirm earlier claims of significant gender-based differences in language use. For instance, in a study of email communication, Thomson and Murachver (2001) found that men and women were equally likely to ask questions, give compliments, apologize, express opinions, and even use abusive language. However, other studies have reported contrasting results. A role-play study conducted by Mulac, Seibold, and Farris (2000), involving male and female supervisors providing professional feedback, revealed that women used more directives, whereas men employed significantly more negations and questions. Additionally, women tended to produce longer sentences, while men used a greater overall number of words. These conflicting findings suggest that gender-related language differences are highly dependent on social and situational contexts.

Differences in linguistic style are also evident in cross-cultural academic writing. Samaie et al. (2014) investigated the types and frequency of hedging devices used in the introduction sections of academic articles written by native speakers of English and Persian. The results showed that Persian writers tended to present their claims more assertively, whereas native English writers employed a greater number of hedging strategies when accepting or rejecting the views of other scholars. These findings indicate that, in addition to gender, cultural and linguistic backgrounds play a crucial role in shaping how individuals express stance and arguments in academic contexts.

In line with the previous discussion on gender-based differences in language use, Lakoff (1973) argues that linguistic differences between men and women are primarily shaped by social factors rather than the language system itself. These social factors include differences in social roles, as men and women carry out different responsibilities within society. Historically, women's social status has been regulated and dominated by men, which often results in women speaking with less confidence due to their lower social position and limited power. Moreover, society has been largely male-centered, considering men superior and women subordinate. Cultural values also play a significant role, as values form the core of culture and influence vocabulary choice and communication style. In addition to social and cultural influences, physiological factors also contribute to gendered language use. For instance, women's left hemisphere develops earlier than men's, allowing girls to speak more frequently and express emotions more openly. Differences in vocal resonance and pitch between males and females further contribute to distinct voice qualities in communication.

The findings of the current study support several aspects of Lakoff's theory while also expanding on Tannen's (1990) perspectives. Female students in this study used more exaggerated adjectives and adverbs, as well as expletive expressions such as *oh dear!* and *oh my God!*, indicating a higher degree of emotional expressiveness compared to males. They were also more talkative, elaborative, and expressive in interviews, whereas male students tended to give minimal and concise responses. These findings confirm Tannen's idea that men and women use language differently, particularly in terms of conversational style, topic choice, and problem-solving strategies.

Several similarities can be observed between the current study and previous theories. First, both Lakoff and Tannen, as well as this study, recognize that gender influences communication styles, choice of words, and expression of emotions. Second, the research aligns with the notion that women tend to be more emotionally expressive and relational in their language use, while men are more focused on information exchange and brevity. Third, both previous theories and this study acknowledge the influence of social and cultural contexts in shaping linguistic behavior.

At the same time, notable differences also emerge. Lakoff emphasizes the role of social power and societal hierarchy as the main cause of women's linguistic patterns, whereas Tannen focuses more on differences in conversational strategies, such as rapport versus report talk. The current study shows that while these tendencies exist, they are not absolute: situational factors, personal personality, and interview context also significantly influence language use. For example, some male participants displayed expressiveness in certain contexts, and some female participants gave concise responses when the situation demanded it. Moreover, while Lakoff stresses innate biological factors, this study suggests that emotional expressiveness and syntactic choices are shaped by both socialization and immediate interactional contexts, highlighting an interaction between nature and nurture.

In summary, the main similarity is that gender remains a significant factor influencing communication styles, emotional expression, and language patterns. The differences lie in the nuances: previous theories emphasize general tendencies based on social roles, power, or biological factors, while the current study reveals that these patterns are context-dependent, variable, and influenced by both social, cultural, and situational dynamics.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive quantitative approach. The use of a questionnaire is intended to systematically identify and measure the linguistic variations between male and female EFL students, focusing on their word choices, interaction strategies, and politeness levels.

Data Collection Procedures

Data is collected by distributing the questionnaire to the target students. The questionnaire captures self-reported linguistic behavior in various situational contexts, acknowledging that language patterns are context-dependent and variable.

Data Analysis Technique

The data obtained from the questionnaire is analyzed through the following steps:

1. **Categorization:** Grouping responses based on gender (male and female).
2. **Comparative Analysis:** Identifying significant differences in the frequency of specific linguistic features, such as hedging devices or directive vs. indirect speech.

3. **Synthesizing:** Correlating the findings with social, cultural, and situational factors to understand how these dynamics influence language patterns.

RESULT

This section presents the findings of the study on gender differences in language use among EFL students from a sociolinguistic perspective. The results are derived from questionnaire data that explore students' communication styles, levels of participation, politeness strategies, and the influence of social and cultural factors in English classroom interactions. To provide a clearer and more systematic description, the findings are organized based on gender, focusing on similarities and differences between male and female students in their use of English as a foreign language. Table 1 presents the thematic mapping of language use among female EFL students, while Table 2 illustrates the corresponding findings for male EFL students, highlighting key sociolinguistic themes emerging from the data.

Table 1. Thematic Mapping of Language Use Among Female EFL Students

Theme	Main Findings	Behavioral Indicators
Confidence	Moderate	Female students trend to be cautious when speaking and prefer to ensure the accuracy of their opinions before participating in classroom discussions.
Communication style	Indicate	Frequent use of mitigating expression such as <i>I think, maybe, and in my opinion</i> to soften statements.
Language Politeness	High	Word choice and intonation reflect strong attention to politeness norms and social harmony.
Classroom Participation	Selective	Participation increases when prompted by the lecturer or when the topic is well understood.
Cultural Influence	Strong	Cultural norms and social values play a significant role in shaping communication styles.

Table 2. Thematic Mapping of Language Use among Male EFL Students

Theme	Main Findings	Behavioral Indicators
Confidence	High	Male students tend to express their opinions more confidently, even when their linguistic accuracy is not fully developed.
Communication Style	Direct	Opinions are delivered in a more straightforward manner with limited use of mitigating expressions.
Language Politeness	Moderate	Politeness is maintained but is not the primary focus during verbal interactions.
Classroom Participation	Active	Male students more frequently initiate discussions and respond to peers' opinions.

Cultural Influence	Moderate	Cultural factors influence language use but do not strongly constrain verbal expression.
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Table 3. Gender-Based Comparison of Sociolinguistic Theme in Language Use

Theme	Female EFL Students	Male EFL Students
Confidence	Relatively confident but cautious	More confident and spontaneous
Communication Style	Indirect	Direct
Politeness Strategy	Highly polite and mitigated	Moderately polite
Classroom Participation	Selective	More Active
Cultural Influence	Strong	Moderate
Social Orientation	Harmony-oriented	More competitive

Based on the questionnaire responses completed by third-semester students of the English Language and English Education Study Programs, this study indicates that the majority of respondents demonstrate a relatively high level of participation in using English in the classroom. Most students reported that they often initiate conversations or discussions in English and feel reasonably comfortable expressing their opinions, even when their views differ from those of their peers. This finding suggests a relatively good level of confidence in classroom interactions using English as a foreign language.

In terms of communication style, the findings reveal that students tend to use English cautiously and place considerable emphasis on politeness. Many respondents stated that they often wait for their turn before speaking, ensure that their opinions are acceptable to others, and avoid overly direct language to prevent appearing impolite. In addition, the use of hedging expressions such as *maybe*, *I think*, and *perhaps* was more prevalent than the use of strong assertive statements. These findings indicate that norms of politeness and carefulness strongly influence the way students communicate in English.

The questionnaire results also show that students tend to adjust their language use based on their interlocutors. More formal language is used when interacting with lecturers compared to peers, and the social status of the interlocutor influences language choice. This finding confirms that social context plays an important role in English language use within academic settings.

Regarding gender differences, most respondents acknowledged that gender influences confidence levels and speaking styles in English. Male students were perceived as more dominant in classroom discussions, while female students were considered more polite and cautious in expressing their opinions. Furthermore, respondents recognized the presence of certain social expectations related to gendered speech styles, which indirectly affect classroom interactions and communication strategies.

Cultural and social environmental factors also emerged as significant influences. Most students reported that local culture and social values limit the ways in which they express opinions in English. Peer environments and social norms encourage students to adjust their language use to maintain social acceptance. Responses to open-ended

questions further revealed that environmental factors and learning experiences exert a greater influence than gender alone.

Overall, the findings suggest that the use of English as a foreign language among students is influenced not only by linguistic competence but also by gender, cultural background, social norms, and interactional context. These factors interact in shaping communication styles, confidence levels, and strategies for learning and using English in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated gender differences in language use among EFL students from a sociolinguistic perspective. The findings reveal that male and female students differ in their communication styles, levels of participation, and strategies of politeness in English classroom interactions. Male students tend to display higher confidence and more direct language use, while female students are generally more cautious and employ more indirect and polite forms of expression. These differences reflect distinct interactional patterns shaped by gendered communication practices.

The study also highlights the significant role of social and cultural norms in influencing students' language use. Students adjust their level of formality based on interlocutors and social context, particularly when interacting with lecturers compared to peers. Cultural values and social expectations further shape how students express opinions in English, often encouraging careful and polite communication to maintain social harmony. Importantly, the findings suggest that environmental factors and learning experiences may exert a stronger influence on language use than gender alone.

Overall, the results indicate that language use among EFL students is a complex phenomenon influenced not only by linguistic competence but also by gender, sociocultural norms, and interactional context. These findings underscore the importance of incorporating sociolinguistic awareness into EFL instruction to create more inclusive and supportive classroom environments. Future research is encouraged to explore gender and language use through diverse methodological approaches and broader contexts to gain a deeper understanding of sociolinguistic dynamics in EFL settings.

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