

# **Gender and Language Use in the ESL Classroom**

Tran-Hoang-Thu

[indefatigable2003@yahoo.com](mailto:indefatigable2003@yahoo.com)

Alliant International University

San Diego, California

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## Abstract

This literature review focuses on presenting an overview of research on language and gender. An introduction to the factors influencing language use will first be made. Second, a brief discussion on sex and gender will be made to clarify the terminology used in the literature. Third, physical differences between men and women will also be pointed out. Next, commonly held beliefs about the differences in male and female speech styles will also be presented. Additionally, some salient works in the field will be indicated. Fourth, some testable claims about men's and women's language use will be pointed out. Fifth, discrepancies in major areas such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation between women's and men's language use will be addressed, with an emphasis on the use of hedging. Specifically, a few studies investigating the use of hedges among women and men will be looked at. In addition, research on gender differences in the classroom will be mentioned. Finally, based on the review of the literature, a tentative conclusion will be drawn.

Sociolinguistics, the study of the relationship between language and society, investigates numerous variables that may affect language use such as age, ethnicity, regional locations, social classes, and gender. Linguistic variation is actually central to the study of language use (Reppen, Fitzmaurice, & Biber, 2002). The issues of language and gender have been extensively discussed by a whole host of authors including Lakoff (1975), Key (1975), Tannen (1990, 1993, 1994, 1998), Bonvillain (2000), Freeman and McElhinny (1996), Coates (1993), Kramarae (1981), Inoue (2007), Besnier (2007), McElhinny and Mills (2007), Sunderland (2000), and Cameron (2006), to name but a few. In 1975, Key stated that language is in a constant state of flux and the focus these days is on the changes in the area of male and female linguistic behavior. As Poos and Simpson (2002) observed, Lakoff (1975) in fact started a boom in research on language and gender.

To begin with the terminology used to name the difference between men and women has been either called sex or gender. These two terms have been clearly differentiated by such authors as Coates (1993) and Cameron (2006). Coates (1993) postulated that whereas sex refers to a biological distinction, gender is employed to describe socially constructed categories based on sex. In a relatively similar vein, Cameron (2006) indicated that sex is employed in connection with the biological characteristics that mark humans and other animals as either male or female, but gender refers to the cultural traits and behaviors considered appropriate for men and women by a particular society. Historically, as Sadiqi (2003) asserted, gender was first employed in linguistics and other areas of social sciences. Gender indeed is a social construct, and it is through the concepts of gender which society transforms female and male human beings into social women and men and assigns them roles and gives them cultural values (Bonvillain, 2000).

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Prior to discussing the differences between language use of women and men, commonly agreed physical differences between males and females may be worth mentioning. Citing from Gail Shea (1972), Key (1975) pinpointed some basic physical differences between men and women which have been accepted among scientists without contradiction.

1. Females have less muscle and more fat.
2. Females have less muscular strength.
3. Females weigh less.
4. Females have a tendency to be less well coordinated, except for fine hand movement.
5. Females mature physically more rapidly.
6. Females live longer.

Likewise, Wardhaugh (2010) posited that the fact that there are differences between men and women is by no means a matter of dispute and that an obvious difference is that females have two X chromosomes, while males have an X and a Y. In addition to pointing out the differences that Key (1975) provided, Wardhaugh (2010) further noted that female voice typically has different characteristics from the male voice, and females and males often exhibit different ranges of verbal skills.

Regarding speech styles, analyses of male and female speech style are often organized around a series of global oppositions such as men's talk is competitive, whereas women's talk is cooperative; men talk to gain status, but women talk to create intimacy and connection; men often do report talk, while women often do rapport talk (Johnson & Meinhof, 1996). Similarly, Wardhaugh (2010) observed that in conversations that involve both men and women, many researchers agree that men speak more than women do. Besides, he also indicated that women

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are reported to utilize more polite forms and more compliments than men so as to develop solidarity with others in order to maintain social relationships. On the other hand, Wardhaugh noted that men like to be experts on topics and issues and that they shows a willingness for verbal sparring, and that they are not afraid to show disagreement with others. Additionally, Zimmerman and West (1975) claimed that men frequently interrupt women, whereas women much less frequently interrupt men (cited in Wardhaugh, 2010). Nonetheless, having reviewed a large number of studies, James and Clarke (1993) failed to find significant differences between males and females in terms of interruptions.

Wardhaugh (2010) presented five testable claims from Holmes (1998).

1. Women and men develop different patterns of language use.
2. Women tend to focus on the affective functions of an interaction more often than men do.
3. Women tend to use linguistic devices that stress solidarity more than men do.
4. Women tend to interact in ways which will maintain and increase solidarity, while (especially in formal context) men tend to interact in ways which will maintain and increase their power and status.
5. Women are stylistically more flexible than men.

In the same fashion, Freeman and McElhinny (1996, p. 232) presented the list of Lakoff's (1975) claims about women's use of language and pointed out some studies that critically investigated the claims.

1. Stronger expletives are reserved for men; weaker expletives are reserved for women (Gomm, 1981).
2. Women's speech is more polite than men's.
3. Topics that are considered trivial or unimportant are women's domain (e.g., women discriminate among colors more than men do).
4. Women use "empty" adjectives (*adorable, charming, divine, nice*).

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5. Women use tag questions more than men (e.g., “The weather is really nice today, *isn't it?*” (Cameron, McAlinden, & O’Leary, 1988; Dubois & Crouch, 1975; Holmes, 1986).
6. Women use question intonation in statements to express uncertainty (“My name is Tammy?” (Guy, et al., 1986; McLemore, 1991).
7. Women speak in “italics” (use intensifiers more than men; (e.g., “I feel *so* happy”).
8. Women use hedges more than men do (“It’s *kinda* nice”) (Holmes, 1984; O’Barr & Atkins, 1980).
9. Women use (hyper-)correct grammar. (Cameron & Coates, 1988; Eckert, 1989a; Labov, 1972b).
10. Women don’t tell jokes (Jenkins, 1986; Painter, 1980).

Like Lakoff (1975), Romaine (1999) also observed that it is generally thought that women are more polite than men. Brown (1980) even indicated the reasons why women’s language is more polite and formal than men’s. He remarked that intuitively it may seem reasonable to predict that women will generally speak more formally and politely, because women are culturally relegated to a secondary status relative to men and because a higher level of politeness is expected from inferiors to superiors. Furthermore, women are typically found to employ prestige variants more frequently when discrete linguistic items are analyzed, and their utilization of speech acts and discoursal features comes closer to reflecting the overt prestige forms of their communities (McGroarty, 1996). Additionally, directives, which can be defined as speech acts that try to get someone to do something (Coates, 1993) or utterances assigned to get someone to do something (Goodwin, 1990), can be used differently by males and females. Reviewing studies by Goodwin (1980, 1988, 1990), Coates indicated that boys were found to use explicit commands, whereas girls were typically found to employ more mitigated directives.

Although there are differences, men and women do not develop distinct speech styles, as the boundaries are not clearly identified, and both men and women can use the same features. Females tend to speak in one way and males in another, but there are no forms which are exclusively female or male, and there is always an overlap between the sexes (Swann, 1992).

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This author further provided some conversational features employed by male or female speakers that researchers have identified.

1. Male speakers have a tendency to interrupt more than females.
2. Males utilize more direct speech than females.
3. Females tend to give more conversational support such as “Mnh,” “Yeah,” and “Right” than males.
4. Females are more likely to use features indicating tentativeness such as tag questions, hedges, and expressions that make them sound more hesitant and uncertain.

Differences between men’s and women’s language can be traced in such areas as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995) maintained that language is a major tool people utilize to constitute themselves, and that how people employ language including word choice, grammar, and pronunciation is a very significant component of self-constitution. Sociolinguistics analyses inform us about male and female speaking styles which include differences in pronunciation, use of prosodic cues (such as intonation, velocity, and volume), grammatical forms, and choices of vocabulary (Bonvillain, 2000).

Research has also looked at differences in pronunciation between men and women. Reviewing a study conducted by Fischer (1958) to investigate children’s speech in a small New England town, Bonvillain (2000) pointed out that Fischer (1958) was unable to ascertain gender-related patterns in pronunciation of “-ing,” the progressive suffix on verbs. Females were found to use the variant “-ing” more often, whereas males were found to use “-in” more often. Likewise, in another study by Trudgill (1972), adult females were found to employ standard features at greater frequency than men (cited in Bonvillain, 2000). Moreover, Labov (1966)

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found that women in New York city showed greater use of prestige /-r/. Having reviewed some studies that examined the differences between language and gender in the English language, Bonvillain (2000) concluded that regardless of regional dialects or races, females employ standard and prestige pronunciation at higher rates than do males of the same age and social or racial groups. As Bonvillain indicated, intonation, a complex combination of rhythm, volume, and pitch overlaying entire utterances, is a crucial feature that influences how people sound. She generally concluded that women utilize more dynamic intonational contours than men, and that women use a wider range of pitches within their repertory and a more rapid and marked shift in volume and velocity.

Concerning grammatical variants used by males and females, Cheshire (1982) found that boys consistently used nonstandard grammatical constructions more often than girls. In addition, Lakoff (1975) postulated that women employed tag questions, as they are reluctant to make direct assertions (cited in Bonvillain, 2000). Besides, Holmes (1984) ascertained that a significant difference in the functional role of tags in the speech of women and men: Whereas men more often employ tags for speakers-oriented goals, to obtain or confirm information for themselves, women more often use tags for addressee-oriented goals, specifically as strategies to engage addressees in talk (cited in Bonvillain, 2000).

One of the major differences between male and female speech can be found in word choice, and a number of authors such as Bailey and Timm (1976), Jay (1980), Deklerk (1992), and Hughes (1997) have discussed this issue. Bonvillain (2000) pointed out three areas of vocabulary differences between men and women. First, men are believed to use curse words with greater frequency and greater profane force, than women, while women tend to use milder expletives. Second, women tend to employ more intensifiers and modifiers such as adjectives

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and adverbs than men, because the society allows them to express emotion, whereas men are expected to control their feelings and they are also expected to refrain from employing words which have marked emotional expressiveness. Third, women have a noted tendency to use more hedge words in discourse in order to minimize confrontation with an addressee who may have a different view.

In the aforementioned section, it is pointed out that one of the claims that Lakoff (1975) made is that women employ more hedges than men. Freeman and McElhinny (1996) identified two studies (Holmes, 1984; O'Barr & Atkins, 1980) that investigated such a claim. Other studies examining men's and women's use of hedges are Meyerhoff (1992), Dixon and Foster (1996), and Poos and Simpson (2002). Holmes (1986, 1998, cited in Poos & Simpson, 2002) successfully challenged the association of hedging with powerless, and focused instead on its politeness functions. As Poos and Simpson indicated, Holmes continued to find support for the notion that hedging is more characteristic of women's language than men's. By reviewing research carried out by Meyerhoff (1992) and Dixon and Foster (1996), Poos and Simpson (2002) showed that these researchers failed to find significant gender differences in the use of hedges. Particularly, Dixon and Foster (1996) in fact concluded that if gender differences in the utilization of hedges do exist, they are subtle and subject to marked variation across speakers and context of use.

Using data from the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) to find out if there is gender difference in the use of 'sort of' and 'kind of' in academic contexts, Poos and Simpson (2002) found that there is no significant gender-related effect on speakers' hedging frequencies, but there is a noticeable difference in hedging frequencies depending on the academic division. Specifically, as they noted, there is a conspicuous difference in the use of



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'kind of' and 'sort of' between the physical sciences and the humanities. Also, other studies that examined the use of hedges in written discourse from English for academic purposes scholars include Crompton (1997, 1998), Hyland (1996, 1998, 1998a, 2000), Kreutz and Harres (1997), Markkanen and Schröder (1997), Salager-Meyer (1994), Varttala (1999), and Vassileva (1997).

Whereas gender differences in the use of language have been researched in various social contexts, gender differences have also been particularly looked at in the classroom. Swann (1992) presented some major findings in research on gender differentiation in the classroom.

- While there are quiet pupils of both sexes, the more outspoken pupils tend to be boys.
- Boys also tend to 'stand out' more than girls. Michelle Stanworth (1983) notes that in her study teachers initially found some girls 'hard to place'. Boys also referred to a 'faceless' bunch of girls.
- Boys generally tend to be more assertive than girls. For instance, a US study of whole class talk (Sadker and Sadker, 1985) found boys were eight times more likely than girls to call out.
- Girls and boys tend to sit separately; in group work, pupils usually elect to work in single-sex rather than mixed-sex groups.
- When they have the choice, girls and boys often discuss or write about gender-typed topics.
- Boys are often openly disparaging towards girls.
- In practical subjects, such as science, boys hog the resources.
- In practical subjects, girls 'fetch and carry' for boys, doing much of the cleaning up, and collecting books and so on.
- Boys occupy, and are allowed to occupy, more space, both in class and outside-for example, in play areas.
- Teachers often make distinctions between girls and boys - for disciplinary or administrative reasons or to motivate pupils to do things.
- Teachers give more attention to boys than to girls.
- Topics and materials for discussion are often chosen to maintain boys' interests.
- Teachers tend not to perceive disparities between the numbers of contributions from girls and boys. Sadker and Sadker (1985) showed US teachers a video of a classroom talk in which boys made three times as many contributions as girls-but teachers believed the girls had talked more.
- Teachers accept certain behavior (such as calling out) from boys but not from girls.
- Female teachers may themselves be subject to harassment from male pupils.
- 'Disaffected' girls tend to opt out quietly at the back of the class, whereas disaffected boys make trouble (pp.51-52).

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In the field of teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), interest in gender and learners of English has already been materialized in a book entitled 'Gender and English Language Learners' edited by Norton and Pavlenko (2004). Regrettably, however, the authors contributing to the book did not seem to be interested in finding out the differences between male and female students' language use in the class.

This literature review has evidently shown that gender differences among women's and men's language use have been rigorously studied, but the vast majority of the studies were conducted a relatively long time ago. Although conclusive results about distinctive language use by males or females is hard to achieve, it seems that it was possible for researchers and authors interested in the issues of male and female language use to make claims that can be empirically tested and investigated. Much has been known about the discrepancy in the use of language between women and men. Nevertheless, differences in language use among male and female students in the classroom seem to be currently lacking, despite the fact that general behavioral gender differences have been observed in the classroom. It may seem imperative that more efforts are needed to further and deepen educators' understanding of female and male language use in the classroom, as classroom language is a special and frequent mode that students use during their schooling years. Educators, researchers, and classroom teachers may ill afford to fail to document and analyze gender differences in language use in the classroom in general and in the ESL classroom in particular.

Overall, this literature review has clearly indicated that the issue of language and gender is by no means a novel topic, and gender differences in the classroom is also not new; however, research on gender and language use in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom has not seemed to be investigated in a systematic manner. In the process of conducting the literature

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review, no study has been found to address this issue specifically. Thus, more empirical research is much needed to shed further light on gender differences in the use of English in the ESL classroom. Fairclough (1989) postulated that sociolinguistics is strong on finding out the facts of variation, but it is weak on exploring the reasons for the variation. It is, therefore, decidedly possible to investigate gender differences in language use in the ESL classroom. The result from such research may be of great interest to classroom teachers as well as sociolinguists. It is hoped that researchers may start looking at the ESL classroom as a potential and fertile place for research on the differences in language use between male and female ESL students.

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