

Role of English Language as a Literacy Tool in Shaping the Perception of Women's Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Over the centuries, the notion of women's empowerment has created an immense effect on both women and men. This research aims to study the influence of the English language in shaping the concept of women's empowerment amongst undergraduate students in a private university in Malaysia. The objectives of this study are to identify male and female undergraduate' perception towards women's empowerment and to investigate the correlation between the role of the English language and the undergraduate' perceptions towards women's empowerment. This study is based on a correlational research design that includes 570 undergraduates from 6 distinct faculties. T-test and regression analysis were done to test the correlation between the variables and their significance. The findings of this study established that there is a significant difference between male and female students' perceptions that indicates that female and male participants have varying perceptions towards women's empowerment. With the English language playing a significant role in shaping the perception of women's empowerment, the female participants were self-aware of how engagement in the English language can enhance the extent of their empowerment. Projection of the findings also addressed the growing importance of literacy as a mediator in the relationship between the English language and women's empowerment.

Key words: Women's Empowerment, English Language, Gender Perception, Linguistic Relativity, Regression Analysis

"It took me quite a long time to develop a voice, and now that I have it, I am not going to be silent"

Madeleine Albright

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Empowerment is a notion that has been long discussed and investigated by various experts and philosophers over the era. Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power in people for use in their own lives, their communities and their society, by acting on issues they define as important (Page & Czuba, 1999). For this study, the concept of empowerment will be narrowed down to specifically focus on women's empowerment.

Over the centuries, the notion of women's empowerment has created an immense effect across the world. Women's empowerment refers to the social transformation that gives women the ability to regain the social, political and economic stability that they may have been deprived of in the past. Women's empowerment grants the right to women in order to make certain decisions that enable them to govern their own lives and gain equal rights as their opposite gender in

terms of education, health care, lawful rights, opportunity to work and many other aspects of life.

According to the United Nations, women's empowerment mainly has five components:

- Generating women's sense of self-worth.
- Women's right to have and to determine their choices.
- Women's right to have access to equal opportunities and all kinds of resources.
- Women's right to have the power to regulate and control their own lives, within and outside the home.
- Women's ability to contribute to creating a more just social and economic order.

One of the factors that enabled this advancement in women's empowerment is global expansion. Global expansion ensures that women are acknowledged and accepted for their abilities and contributions to make the world and serves as a tool for women to gain recognition and equality. Global expansion is reached through the medium of technology and communication. The Internet serves as a global platform that provides women with all the necessary information and knowledge they need.

The internet also provides the opportunity of information seeking for women to share and receive information on a

globalized scale. Information seeking does not only focus on how one seeks information; rather, the skills rely further on the ability to be able to analyze and identify the reliability of sources that are specified to the type of information one needs. When women gain these skills, driven by global expansion as well as the advancement of technology, they can infer further on the extent of their empowerment. This is one of the ways how women across the world are able to identify whether or not they are empowered. All this sharing on women and their empowerment is further amplified through education.

Education plays a key role in ensuring and reinforcing women's empowerment as it gives women the intellectual skills needed to respond to challenges, confront the traditional and societal role that has been imprinted on them and grants them the power of visibility and acknowledgement. While there is consensus that women's empowerment identifies strongly with formal education, there is still much to learn about other related factors such as language and literacy capacity.

Many of the past studies conducted, did not involve the role of the English language as a literacy tool on the development of women's empowerment. Few of the past studies (Karim et al., 2018; Murthy & Kumar, 2009) also did not include undergraduate students as the key sample. Bilal and Ullah (2010) argue that it is imperative to investigate the perspectives of undergraduates towards women's empowerment. In other words, there is still a serious lack of studies involving the perception of women's empowerment among undergraduate students in institutions of higher education in Malaysia. In addressing these gaps, this study investigated the influence of the English language in shaping the perception of women's empowerment amongst male and female undergraduate students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study was to analyze and understand the relationship between language and women's empowerment. The direction of the study was further governed by the following research questions, namely:

1. What is the male and female undergraduate students' perception towards women's empowerment amongst?
2. What is the correlation between the role of the English language and the undergraduate students' perception towards women's empowerment?

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Following are the corresponding research hypotheses for this study:

H_{01} : There is no statistically significant difference in the male and female undergraduate students' perception towards women's empowerment.

H_{02} : There is no statistically significant correlation between the role of the English language and the undergraduate students' perception towards women's empowerment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empowerment is generally known as the process through which development and growth are attained for the betterment of an individual or a society at large. In the current world of rapid globalization, the awareness and acceptance towards empowerment have also vastly increased. Empowerment is a process that fosters power in people for use in their own lives, their communities and their society, by acting on issues they define as important (Page & Czuba, 1999). Empowerment is a vast notion that encompasses many components, for example, the empowerment of women and empowerment of employees, just to name a few. The empowerment of women has been one of the most symbolic and ever-developing representatives of the notion of empowerment.

Women's Empowerment

As discussed in the previous section, women's empowerment is a significant aspect of empowerment. Women's empowerment can be defined as a process that requires preconditions that can facilitate the processes that expand women's agency or the ability to make choices, which in turn determines the outcomes that have direct implications on their welfare (Siddaraju, 2019; Muberekwa & Nkomo, 2016). Even today, women's empowerment depicts the social process that grants women the pathway to autonomy and this has always been a topic of discussion that has been closely knitted with gender equality (Cin, Gümüç & Weiss, 2021).

Women's empowerment has been regarded as a stepping-stone that helps society or culture achieve the heights of gender equality. There has been a number of previous research conducted in India in the effort to understand women's empowerment and the factors that affect it. This could be partly because India is one of the strongest patriarchal nations in the world. It was noted that many of the studies defined women's empowerment as achieving equal social status as men. Women's empowerment is a process through which women come to recognize their inherent worth (Siddaraju, 2019), and begin to participate on equal terms with men in efforts to dismantle patriarchy and promote social and economic development. As acceptable as this statement may seem, it is extremely important to note that a woman's empowerment is not defined by the respect and acknowledgement she receives from the opposite gender.

Women's empowerment is a multi-faceted concept and an ongoing process, and defining it is a challenging task. Women's empowerment grants women the ability and opportunity to gain self-worth and self-contentment where women recognize their abilities and gain the rightful liberty. Gender equality does not mean that men and women are the same or equal and need to have a fair share of something. Rather, it characterizes social conditions and relationships in which a vision of mutuality and cooperation shapes interactions and enables men and women to reach their full potential (Siddaraju, 2019; Odigwe et al., 2017).

Women's empowerment enables women to gain visibility, autonomy, and recognition in society. Empowerment is considered to take place when a woman challenges the existing norms and culture of the society in which she lives, to effectively improve her well-being (Agarwal et al., 2016). Many aspects could determine the empowerment of a woman. This study aims to focus on three factors that determine and promote women's empowerment. The three factors are education, knowledge, and values.

English Language as a Catalyst for the Development of Women's Empowerment

Language acts as a tool that helps to communicate and express the various perceptions, thoughts and ideas that occur to the human brain. Language also acts as a medium of knowledge transfer and interaction without which information would be almost impossible to be transmitted across. English as the lingua franca plays an important role in cultivating the power of language across the globe. The English language is one of the most effective mediums used by people originating from various ethnic and geographical backgrounds for communication and information delegation. Apart from its ability to adequately transmit messages and information across, language is so powerful that it can shape the perception and thought processes of a person. To use language is to limit oneself to the modes of perception inherent in that language because language is not only a form, but it also shapes how individuals think ideologically (Whorf, 1956; Sapir, 1949). The Linguistic Relativity principle, also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, is the idea that the difference in cultural concepts and categories integrated into different languages affects the cognitive understanding of the practical world in such a way that speakers of different languages think and behave differently because of the difference in the languages they speak (Wolff & Holmes, 2011). It is these differences that govern the way people think and perceive the world around them.

In Malaysia, women's empowerment has attained its fair share of recognition and acknowledgement. The Malaysian government has taken several initiatives that aim to make Malaysia a country that celebrates women and their achievements. It could be seen that Malaysian women are more empowered now than they were a few decades ago. The government and the society are more accepting of the status of women in the making of the nation. Naturally, this links back to women having higher education. There are now more women than men in higher education.

According to an article published in the STAR newspaper in 2017 on women's empowerment in Malaysia, a report authored by the Penang Institute in 2016 found that the difference between female and male enrolment in public universities has increased in favour of females from 67,734 in 2009 to 86,798 in 2013. About 45% of engineering graduates in Malaysia are female, compared to 17% in the United States. This shows that getting married is no longer the primary concern of women. Instead, having a professional career and a stable financial solidity is the central focus.

Literacy as a Mediator between English Language and Women's empowerment

Securing a professional career and financial solidity has been a growing interest with young women following emerging opportunities in the employment sector. Such prospects arise from the 1975 *Persepolis Declaration*, 1997 Hamburg Declaration, 2006-2015 Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) and 1981 *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* instituting literacy as a fundamental constituent in yielding equity (Valtin et al., 2016; Eldred, 2013; Moretti & Frandell, 2013).

Since, the discussion has evolved to recognize literacy as a functional quality in advocating women's empowerment (Eldred, 2013; Unterhalter et al., 2010). The primary intent of functional literacy is to encourage the active participation of individuals, including women of all ages, to improve the value and meaning of their life. Further, Eldred (2013) points out that:

The functional approach promotes learning for specific outcomes relating to, for example, health and economic development. A rights approach is concerned with the development of individuals to fulfil their potential and be involved in all levels of society as equal human beings. (p. 11)

To this, there has been an upsurge of discussion and debates among multiple stakeholders about the integration of literacy in the aims and policies on equity and equality, challenges faced by empowered young girls and women and rights-based approach (Aragon & Miller, 2012; Unterhalter et al., 2010). Literacy is a multifaceted notion that evolves with various contexts of, among others, language competency, gender, culture, and socio-economic status. Amongst the earliest definitions in 1958, literacy covered the skills of reading and writing a simple sentence - this has evolved to incorporate the ability to understand, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials in various contexts such as social, economic, cultural, political, media, technology, family, work and life in general (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2013; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2013).

Development of literacy through the role of the English language gives opportunities for women to expand their understanding and appreciation of their environment and future. According to ProLiteracy (2021), such opportunities of women's empowerment through literacy vary widely from exiting abusive relationships, securing a job to escape the cycle of poverty to ensuring a healthy environment for their children's future success. ProLiteracy is one of the many organizations that focus on aiding women to obtain literacy to achieve empowerment.

The process of learning a language builds on the premises of social dimension. This covers various factors including culture, thought-processes, gender identities, social roles, and many others commonly found in day-to-day social interactions (Rind, 2015; Keysar et al., 2012). To this, learning another foreign language i.e. the English language raises the opportunity for the individual to relegate bias, exercise self-empowerment and rationality in the decision-making process, engage in fulfilling choices, and be more sensitive

when dealing with a spectrum of relationships (Darby et al., 2016; Haghghi, 2014; Keysar et al., 2012).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The quantitative method has its merits where the interest lies in encouraging extrapolation of findings across the wider population (Ary, Jacobs, Irvine & Walker, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). First, the quantitative method allows for a wider scope of data collection to warrant wider generalization across contexts of similar parameters. Second, the quantitative method allows the variables to be analyzed on account of statistical significance. In the context of this study, adoption of the quantitative method encouraged extrapolation of findings involving the role of the English language and perception towards women's empowerment across the wider population of undergraduate students in UCSI University.

Based on the quantitative method, this study specifically employed the correlational research design in an attempt to investigate the relationship between the identified variables of the study (Creswell, 2012). That is, the correlational research design is necessary to establish statistical significance to the relationship between the role of the English language and perception towards women's empowerment. Further, the correlational research design warrants to investigate only the degree of relationship between the variables without manipulating the investigated variables or introducing an intervention - a common feature of experimental research design (Ary et al., 2018; Creswell, 2012). This principle was particularly important in the context of this study to ensure that there is no manipulation to the investigated variables, but to merely determine the degree of association between the role of the English language and perception towards women's empowerment.

Participants and Sample Size

The target population of this study refers to the cohort of undergraduate students housing in UCSI University's Kuala Lumpur campuses. There are approximately 6,000 to 7,000 undergraduate students for the year 2018. Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table of sample size measurement was referred to in determining the intended sample size of this study. Based on this table, the ideal sample size for a population of 6,000 to 7,000 is approximately 361 to 364 - appropriate to establish statistical significance.

However, the sample size was established at a total of $n = 600$ to ensure a better representation of the student population in UCSI University KL Campus. This measure was necessary for several reasons (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). First, it was important to determine the sample size to account for effective sample representation based on the stratified sampling technique. Second, as the population increases the sample size increases at a diminishing rate and remains relatively constant at slightly more than 380 cases. Finally, the effect of false or unusable data could be reduced with an adequate number of valid data.

The final sample size count was $n = 570$, giving a response rate of 95%. This final sample size count was achieved after eliminating invalid data, incomplete survey forms, and dubious filled-in survey forms.

Sampling Method

The stratified sampling technique was employed in this study. Based on this sampling technique, the samples are stratified into several strata (categories) based on certain similar characteristics relevant to the variables of this study. The stratified sampling decreases the sampling error as it allows any element within the stratum to be accepted as a possible sample (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

In the context of this study, the samples were categorized according to their faculty of study. A total of six faculties housed in UCSI University, Kuala Lumpur Campus, were chosen as follows:

- a. Faculty of Social Sciences and Liberal Arts (FoSSLA)
- b. Faculty of Applied Sciences (FAS)
- c. Faculty of Business & Information Science (FoBIS)
- d. Faculty of Engineering, Technology and Built Environment (FETBE)
- e. De Institute of Creative Arts and Design (ICAD)
- f. Institute of Music (IoM)

Based on the stratified sampling technique, a total of $n=100$ sample size was taken from each faculty.

Research Instrument

A survey questionnaire was used as the instrument to collect data. A survey questionnaire is deemed as the most appropriate form of data collection for this study as the study aims to explore the perceptions of the participants on the subject matter and the statistical analysis associated with this approach helps understand the strongest perception.

The concept for the instrument items was adapted from the following two sources of information:

- a. UN Women's Empowerment Principles Survey by New Zealand Work Research Institute (2016)
- b. National Discourses on Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh: Continuities and Change by Institute of Development Studies (Nazneen et al., 2011)

The concepts adopted from this questionnaire primarily focused on the various aspects of women's empowerment advocated by the United Nations, motivated by the Women's Empowerment Policies, as follows:

- a. Leadership Promotes Gender Equality
- b. Equal Opportunity, Inclusion and Non-Discrimination
- c. Health, Safety and Freedom from Violence
- d. Education and Training
- e. Community Leadership and Engagement

These adopted concepts were further augmented with notions of language and women's empowerment addressed in the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Working Papers 368 titled "National Discourses on Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh: Continuities and Change" (Nazneen et al., 2011).

Based on these fundamental concepts raised in these two documents, items were designed to specifically measure the

correlational association between rehearsal of the English language and perception towards women's empowerment. These items were developed in deliberation with the supervising researcher, and validated by three categories of stakeholders namely the supervisor of this research, two academics and two industry stakeholders

Upon the validation from stakeholders, a pilot study was conducted to test the applicability of the questionnaire amongst the intended population. A pilot study is needed to be done before one decides to use a new instrument as it provides a direction for the researcher to revise and refine the questions for enhanced understanding and higher return rates (Ary et al., 2018; Cohen et al., 2017). The pilot study was done amongst 40 UCSI students selected randomly from different faculties and these students were not part of the target participants of this study. A Cronbach Alpha test was done to test the reliability of the instruments based on the data obtained from the pilot study, this will be further discussed in the Reliability of Instrument section.

Validity of Instrument

In the context of this study, validity is the extent to which the survey questionnaire can measure the perception of the male and female undergraduate students towards women's empowerment and the correlation between this perception and the English language.

Feedback from experts was sought to validate the adaptability of the study and amendments are made to improve the quality of the questionnaire to optimize the feasibility of the questionnaire. This is to ensure the applicability of the questionnaire to fit the context of this study. The comments from the experts establish face validity, construct validity and content validity.

In total, five experts validated the testing instrument. Two were from the education sector and two experts with industrial experience and one research supervisor. All of whom were accomplished experts in the relevant field.

Reliability of Instrument

Reliability tests are conducted to investigate the reliability of the scales in measuring the items in the construct. The reliability of a measuring instrument is the degree of consistency with which it measures whatever it is measuring (Ary et al., 2018). The questionnaire (see Appendix A) consists of three sections:

Section A: Demographic Information

Section B: Perception towards Women's empowerment

Section C: Correlation between English Language and Women's empowerment

After the instrument validation process, the instrument was then subjected to a pilot study for reliability testing. A reliability test was conducted to test the internal consistency of the scales and to what extent does the items measure the intended construct. The Cronbach Alpha value for the overall instrument is .904. Table 1 presents the reliability statistics for the instrument and its respective sections.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following sections highlight the findings and discussion of the data analysis. In general, the findings indicated positive results on the influence of the English language in shaping the perceptions towards women's empowerment amongst the undergraduate community.

Table 2 shows the total number of participants according to gender. Based on Table 2, there were 217 male participants (38.1%) and 353 female participants (61.9%) resulting in a total of 570 participants.

Table 3 shows the frequency of participants according to the respective faculties. Based on Table 3, the Faculty of Applied Sciences (FAS) has the highest number of participants ($n = 132$, 23.2%). This is followed by the Faculty of Engineering Technology and Built Environment (FETBE) ($n = 116$, 20.4%). Thirdly, the Faculty of Business (FOBIS) covered 18.6% of the investigated sample size ($n = 106$). Institute of Music (IoM), however, is the faculty with the least number of participants ($n = 62$) covering only 10.9% of the population.

Table 4 shows the frequency of gender across different faculties. As stated above, the highest number of male

Table 1. Reliability statistics

Section	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
Section A	Not Applicable	
Section B	.897	12
Section C	.843	10

Table 2. Frequency of gender

Gender	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
Male	217	38.1
Female	353	61.9
Total	570	100.0

Table 3. Faculty

Faculty	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
FOSSLA	83	14.6
FOBIS	106	18.6
FAS	132	23.2
FETBE	116	20.4
ICAD	71	12.5
IOM	62	10.9

Table 4. Gender and faculty

	Faculty						Total
	FOSSLA	FOBIS	FAS	FETBE	ICAD	IOM	
Count	25	55	26	66	28	17	217
%	4.4	9.6	4.6	11.6	4.9	3.0	38.1
Count	58	51	106	50	43	45	353
%	10.2	8.9	18.6	8.8	7.5	7.9	61.9
Count	83	106	132	116	71	62	570
%	14.6	18.6	23.2	20.4	12.5	10.9	100.0

participants are from the Faculty of Engineering and Built Environment (FETBE) (n = 66, 11.6%) whilst the Institute of Music has the lowest number of male participants (n = 17, 3.0%). On the other hand, the Faculty of Applied Sciences (FAS) has the highest number of female participants (n = 106, 18.6%). Institute of Creative Arts and Design (ICAD) covered only 7.5% of the investigated sample size (n = 43) with the lowest number of female participants.

Inferential Statistics: Independent Sample t-test for Section B: Perceptions towards Women's Empowerment

This section aims to explore the perceptions of male and female participants on women's empowerment i.e. to answer research question 1: What are the male and female undergraduate students' perceptions towards women's empowerment?

Based on the identified research question, the following are the hypothesis that guides the analysis:

Ho₁: There is no statistically significant difference between the perception of male and female participants towards women's empowerment.

Table 5 shows the t-test analysis between gender and all the constructed items in Section B: perception on women's empowerment. Following the group statistics that presented the sample size and mean of the participants for this section, Table 6 shows the t-test results for the variable above.

The mean score of the female participants (M=48.59, SD=5.88) on this variable is statistically significantly higher (t= -4.194, df=568), two-tailed (p=0.000) than those of the male participants (M=46.45, SD=5.98) on the same variable. Hence, the null hypothesis is not supported.

This finding indicates that the female participants have a positive perception of women's empowerment as compared to the male participants. This finding is in relation to a study conducted on men's perception of women's participation in development initiatives (WPD) in rural Bangladesh. The study revealed that there was a common view of female-focused development as discriminatory against men. The men made several complaints of WPD as unfair. It was also a commonly held belief among educated young men that the employment system is discriminatory against male candidates (Karim et al., 2017).

The bitter truth that comes with the difference in perceptions is that these are the thoughts of young male

undergraduates of the millennial century who may be the future leaders of the world. The repercussions of having future world leaders who may view women's empowerment as less significant have the potential to hinder the revolutionary change that women have achieved.

The findings of this study, however, may contradict a study done on male's attitude on women's empowerment where the overall observation of the perceptions of males is fairly good. Around 40% of the males had positive perceptions and around one-third (33%) have moderately positive perceptions as against 25 percent with negative perceptions on women's autonomy (Murthy & Kumar, 2009). The difference in findings could be due to the variance in the geographical and cultural background of the studied population.

Item-Specific Statistical Significance in Section B: Perception on Women's Empowerment

This sub-section will present a detailed discussion of the significant differences based on individual items. Out of 12 items presented in Section B which aimed to measure the participants' perception of women's empowerment, four items achieved statistical significance, namely, items B8, B10, B11 and B12.

Item B8: In my opinion, access to knowledge promotes the advancement of women's empowerment.

This item aims to explore the perception of the participants towards the role of knowledge in developing women's empowerment. This section intends to answer the following hypotheses:

Ho_{1A}: There is no statistically significant difference between the perception of male and female participants towards item B8

Table 7 shows the gender frequency of item B8.

Following the group statistics that presented the sample size and mean of the participants for this item, Table 8 shows the t-test results for item B8.

The mean score of the female participants on this variable (M=4.21, SD=0.761) is statistically significantly higher (t= -3.758, df=568), two-tailed (p=0.000) than those of the male participants on the same variable (M=3.95, SD=0.846), hence, the null hypothesis is not supported.

Based on these results, it is apparent that the female participants were more agreeable that literacy warrants access to knowledge for women's empowerment. In this context, knowledge refers to institutions of formal education, and engagement in such institutions provides women with ample opportunities to enhance their command of literacy i.e. the English language. As a lingua franca, mastery of the English language facilitates the breadth and depth of literacy which evolves with the advancement of technology.

Table 5. Gender frequency for Section B

Gender	Group Statistics			
	Sample Size	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Male	217	46.45	5.98	.41
Female	353	48.59	5.88	.31

Table 6. Independent samples t-test of perception on women's empowerment

Independent Samples Test		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Perception on Women's empowerment	Equal variances assumed	.15	.70	-4.19	568	.000

In a quasi-experimental study investigating the impact of integrating YouTube technology in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, Alwehaibi (2015) argues that students have a positive experience in using YouTube in their EFL lessons and have improved on their learning outcomes. This is consistent with the findings of a correlational study by Fan et al. (2020). In a study involving 614 undergraduate students, they found that engagement in YouTube and other social media platforms positively correlates with improved reading time and attitude which leads to improved literacy rate. Hence, literacy acts as a gateway for women to seek information and raise awareness on issues that matter to them and womanhood in general. Thus, a good command of literacy has been identified as a key domain in successful instances of women's empowerment (Siddaraju, 2019; Odigwe et al., 2017; Stromquist, 2015).

While there exists a significant difference in this perception between the male and female participants, it must be noted that the male participants also addressed agreement that knowledge does play an important role in the promotion of women's empowerment. This finding supports the arguments presented by Chowdhury and Patnaik (2010) that possessing positive perceptions of gender equality among the male counterparts is crucial in elevating the women class, and ultimately constructively tackling issues of women subordination and inequalities:

Hence, promoting gender equality in the patriarchal social order is impossible without the consent, mindset, and involvement of the male population. In order to improve the status of women in India, the efforts need to get the support, assistance, understanding, and involvement from the major partner – the 'male' of the society. (p. 457)

It is imperative to address equal participation of men to mitigate violence against women, a crucial but fundamental aspect of women's empowerment (Siddaraju, 2019; Odigwe et al., 2017; Stromquist, 2015). They further call for the support and participation of men in the promotion of women's empowerment especially in terms of women's access to knowledge.

Item B10: An empowered woman is able to communicate effectively in managing and resolving conflicts.

This item aims to explore the perception of the participants towards the ability of an empowered woman to be able to communicate effectively in not just managing but also

resolving conflicts. This section intends to answer the following hypothesis:

H_{01B} : There is no statistically significant difference between the perception of male participants and female participants towards item B10.

Table 9 shows the gender frequency of item B10.

Following the group statistics that presented the sample size and mean of the participants for this item, Table 10 shows the *t*-test results for item B10.

The mean score of the female participants on this variable ($M=4.14$, $SD=0.745$) is statistically significantly higher ($t= -2.512$, $df=568$), two-tailed ($p=0.012$) than those of the male participants ($M=3.97$, $SD=0.824$) on the same variable, hence, the null hypothesis is not supported.

These results indicate that the female participants have a more positive perception towards the notion that an empowered woman can communicate effectively in managing and resolving conflicts. It is apparent that the ability to manage conflicts is a fundamental quality that an empowered woman should possess. Good command of literacy allows the individual woman to communicate her thoughts and perspectives diplomatically. By doing so, it does not only prevent the conflict from blowing out of proportion but also resolves the issue at hand. More women are involved in careers in the communications sector, but few have attained positions at the decision-making level or serve on governing boards and bodies that influence media policy (Odigwe et al., 2017; Muberekwa & Nkomo, 2016; Nazneen et al., 2011; Rorstrom, 2011).

Undeniably, literacy is a powerful tool in empowering women of the 21st century as it draws on the active engagement in their daily lives. Bista (2011, p.3) cites an excellent example of this intent of literacy, indicating that "[English] language of communication used to promote Nepal's increasing diplomatic relations with the outside world" – where learning the English language warrants worthier employment and educational chances. Being able to communicate effectively gives empowered women the platform to voice out opinions and suggestions which may work to resolve potential conflicts and this could be done better if they were at the level of authority that permits their perspectives to be heard.

Despite these significant outcomes, it is notable that the male participants have also agreed with the notion that

Table 7. Gender frequency of item B8

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Male	217	3.95	.85	.06
Female	353	4.21	.76	.04

Table 8. Independent samples t-test for item B8 (Equal variances assumed)

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means		
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
.73	.39	-3.76	568	.000

Table 9. Gender frequency of item B10

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Male	217	3.97	.82	.06
Female	353	4.14	.75	.04

Table 10. Independent samples t-test for item B10 (Equal variances assumed)

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means		
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
.41	.52	-2.51	568	.012

effective communication in managing and resolving conflicts is a quality that an empowered woman would possess. This data is particularly interesting because it counter-argues the findings of a study done in Tanzania where the men are affected by the empowerment of the women around them (Rorstrom, 2011). She further mentioned that this has affected men, both socially and economically; their value, identity and self-esteem are degraded. The positive response from the male participants for this variable proves that they are welcoming of empowered women who possess effective communication skills and they view effective communication and the ability to manage and resolve conflicts as a significant aspect of women's empowerment.

Item B11: An empowered woman is confident in leading others to achieve a goal.

This item aims to explore the perception of the participants towards the notion that an empowered woman is one who is confident in leading the people around her to achieve a goal. This section intends to answer the following hypothesis:

Ho_{1C}: There is no statistically significant difference between the perception of male and female participants towards item B11.

Table 11 shows the gender frequency of item B11.

Following the group statistics that presented the sample size and mean of the participants for this item, Table 12 shows the *t*-test results for item B11.

The mean score of the female participants on this variable (M=4.29, SD=0.713) is statistically significantly higher (t= -4.0, df=568), two-tailed (p=0.000) than those of the male participants (M=4.03, SD=0.844) on the same variable, thus, the null hypothesis is not supported.

The female participants believe that a woman who is empowered is someone who possesses leadership abilities and is able to drive others towards achieving a goal. This phenomenon is highly applicable in the working environment of the 21st century where women hold executive positions and possess the authority to run an organization. With English language literacy, an empowered woman can earn an independent income, be educated and employed, and possess the right to ownership and this establishes a women's self-actualization, influence and social movement (Odigwe et al., 2017; Muberekwa & Nkomo, 2016; Nazneen et al., 2011; Rorstrom, 2011). Further, Rotstrom (2011) stated that most men agree that women have ascertained a position of increased influence both within and outside the household in the past decade. This goes to show that men view leadership skills as a significant aspect that enhances women's empowerment and the perception of the male participants of this study, especially with the aforementioned variable, fortifies this frame of mind.

Item B12: An empowered woman has a high sense of self-respect and respect for others (including the opposite gender)

This item aims to explore the perception of the participants towards the perspective that a high sense of self-respect and mutual respect for others (including the opposite gender) is a quality that an empowered woman should possess. This section intends to answer the following hypothesis:

Ho_{1D}: There is no statistically significant difference between the perception of male and female participants towards item B12.

Table 13 shows the gender frequency of item B12.

Following the group statistics that presented the sample size and mean of the participants for this item, Table 14 shows the *t*-test results for item B12.

Table 14 Independent samples *t*-test for item B12 (Equal variances assumed)

The mean score of the female participants on this variable (M=4.31, SD=0.793) is statistically significantly higher (t= -4.397, df=568), two-tailed (p=0.000) than those of the male participants (M=3.99, SD=0.908) on the same variable, hence, the null hypothesis is not supported.

Most female participants have agreed with this statement because a high sense of self-respect grants women the self-realization of their identity and ability. Being able to respect oneself is a significant attribute of women's empowerment. A common phenomenon is the increasing politicization of women's social roles in patriarchal cultures; how women progressively act and make demands collectively in public spheres in order to increase their influence both on national, local and community levels (Muberekwa & Nkomo, 2016; Rorstrom, 2011).

The male participants concur with this perspective, as they agree that women's empowerment yields respect and recognition for women. Cross-items analyses also indicate that exercising the English language aids women into roles of leadership by judiciously drawing on a careful selection of words that emote confidence, compassion, and conflict management. Women, though firm, are less likely to use

Table 11. Gender frequency of item B11

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Male	217	4.03	.84	.06
Female	353	4.29	.71	.04

Table 12. Independent samples *t*-test for item B11 (Equal variances assumed)

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means		
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
2.79	.096	-4.00	568	.000

Table 13. Gender frequency of item B12

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Male	217	3.99	.91	.06
Female	353	4.31	.79	.04

Table 14. Independent samples *t*-test for item B12 (Equal variances assumed)

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means		
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
.36	.55	-4.40	568	.000

assertive language that disrupts relationships but rather build on an environment of nurturing. Hence, women typically choose to courteously acknowledge their needs without compromising self-respect further elicits admiration from their male counterparts.

Regression Analysis

This section aims to explore the perceptions of male and female participants on women's empowerment i.e. to answer research question 2: What is the correlation between the role of the English language and the undergraduates' perceptions towards women's empowerment?

Based on the identified research question, the following are the hypothesis that guides the analysis:

H_{02} : There is no statistically significant correlation between the role of the English language and the undergraduates' perceptions towards women's empowerment.

Regression analysis enables the researcher to predict 'the specific value of one variable when we know or assume values of the other variables (Cohen et al., 2017). This study adopts the simple linear regression analysis which aims to analyze the degree of correlation and measure the strength of the association between perception towards English language and perception towards women's empowerment, holding all other factors constant. Table 15 shows the model summary of the analysis.

The above table indicates that the adjusted R square value is 0.304. R square value shows how much variance in the perception towards women's empowerment is explained by the perception towards the English language. As seen from the table, 30.4% of the variance is accounted for in the model. This shows a moderate fit.

Table 16 shows the beta coefficient of the regression analysis.

A coefficient table of the regression of correlation between perception of English language and perception of women's empowerment indicates a linear positive relationship between the two variables, with an adjusted R square of 0.304. A standardized Beta coefficient of 0.552 is found for the variable 'correlation between English language and women's empowerment' which is statistically significant ($p=0.000$). This proves that the change in perception of the English language would affect the perception towards women's empowerment with a certainty of 55.2%. The results were statistically significant ($p=0.000$). Hence, it can be deduced that participants' perception of the English language is a significant predictor of their perception of women's empowerment.

IMPLICATIONS OF PRACTICE FOR THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND LITERACY

In general, the findings endorse the significant correlation between the role of the English language and perception of women's empowerment. This perception is guided by the notion that the English language enables an empowered woman to voice out against discrimination.

As studied by (Sivakumar, 2008), females should realize their capabilities and potentials which will strengthen their self-image and foster them with confidence to act in life. This study proves that the English language can guide the perception of people towards women's empowerment and give women the self-awareness they need to empower themselves. The extent to which the participants view empowerment as a necessity is significantly shaped by their view of the English language. This establishes that the English language can be used as a viable literacy tool to strengthen and further develop women's empowerment.

However, literacy development is still a growing concern. Women are more illiterate than men in 81 out of 146 countries – with 21 countries demonstrating acute gender disparity with a ratio of 7 literate women to 10 literate men (UNESCO, 2012, p. 5). Further statistics indicate that two-thirds of the worldwide illiterate populace are women – however, younger women from the ages of 15 to 24 portray a more optimistic outcome closing the gap of gender disparity (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2013; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2013, pp. 8-9). Table 17 illustrates the alarming figures of the literacy rate between women and men.

It is evident that learning and practicing the English language projects importance in instituting one's literacy. The findings of this study channeled attention to the role of literacy as a mediator in the relationship between the English language and women's empowerment. Recent advancements in social media have been found to progress reading time and attitude among undergraduates giving way for literacy development (Fan et al., 2020). In the instance of engaging in technology growth, (Ganapathy et al., 2015) also emphasized the need for students to be more alert of digital literacy practices in the online environment: "Students should also be aware of the ethical and legal use of information and

Table 15. Model summary of regression analysis

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
.552 ^a	.305	.304	5.01

a. Predictors: (Constant), Correlation between English language and women's empowerment

Table 16. Beta coefficient of regression analysis

Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
22.947	1.587		14.46	.000
.631	.040	.552	15.79	.000

Table 17. Women vs men literacy rate (Source: adapted from UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2013)

	Women	Men
Arab States	68%	85%
South and West Asia	52%	74%
Sub-Saharan Africa	51%	68%

maintain the security and privacy of information when using digital resources" (p. 32).

As eloquently expressed by the former Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, history has proven that "If you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation". Education brings about self-esteem and confidence in a woman; it encourages her active participation in the development of the society which in turn plays a pivotal role in the development of the nation and the world at large. With the presence of education, women are able to gain the rights to be at par, if not higher, than their male counterparts on the corporate ladder.

Over the centuries, women are seen to take on more jobs and play major lead and decisive roles in many major industries and sectors such as science, education, information technology and healthcare. With the aid of global expansion, technology and education that gives women literacy and the intellectual ability to obtain higher-order thinking skills, their perception of empowerment also evolves and varies.

CONCLUSION

The authors acknowledge that there is a stereotypical view that mastery of English language proficiency may come across as a measure of one's status or intelligence among Malaysians. Hence, the instruments were carefully selected and subjected to series of validity testing to ensure minimal, if not none, effects of such stereotypical views reflected in the items. This also allows for appropriate and relevant interpretation of the survey results.

This debate on women's empowerment, and its undeniable relationship with literacy and the English language, covers a wide spectrum of knowledge, attitude and values between both women and men:

Women's empowerment is a critical aspect of achieving gender equality. It includes increasing a woman's sense of self-worth, her decision-making power, her access to opportunities and resources, her power and control over her own life inside and outside the home, and her ability to effect change. Yet gender issues are not focused on women alone, but the relationship between men and women in society. The actions and attitudes of men and boys play an essential role in achieving gender equality. (Peace Corps, 2021)

There is a statistically significant difference in the perception of women's empowerment amongst male and female undergraduate students at UCSI University. This evinces that the female participants view women's empowerment positively and are more welcoming of it. The male participants also concurred with the notion of women's empowerment, but to a lesser extent than the female participants. This difference in perception was mainly towards these four items:

- a. Importance of access to knowledge
- b. Ability to communicate effectively in managing and resolving conflicts
- c. Confidence in leading others to achieve a goal
- d. Sense of self-respect and respect for others (including the opposite gender)

It was also proven that there is a significant correlation between the role of the English language and the perception of women's empowerment with the degree of correlation was 55.2%. This further indicates that there is a strong correlation between the two variables and this finding fortifies that the English language does play a significant role in shaping the perception of the participants towards women's empowerment. A deeper analysis revealed that participants perceive the English language as an important aspect of women's empowerment as it helps empowered women to voice out against the discriminations that they may experience.

The findings also projected the importance of literacy as a mediator in the relationship between the English language and women's empowerment. Despite concern over the lagging literacy rate among the women population, there is growing evidence that literacy obtained through mastery of the English language can lead to women's empowerment, making ways for improved control across one's work and wellbeing.

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