



STRENGTHENING INCLUSIVE LEXICON: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON GENDER-FAIR LANGUAGE PRACTICES OF ENGLISH TEACHERS IN THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The qualitative-phenomenological study aimed to unveil and understand the practices, experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights of English teachers in integrating gender-fair language (GFL) in the classroom. The study is hinged through the lens of the Gender-Neutral Theory of Miller and Swift (2000), the propositions of Sczesny et al. (2016), and the Theory of Change towards a Transformative Agenda for Gender Equality in the World of Work by the International Labour Organization (2022), which collectively explain the challenges and possibilities of GFL integration. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 14 English instructors from local colleges and the state college in Davao de Oro. The findings revealed that teachers recognized positive shifts in awareness and inclusivity. However, they also encountered challenges such as struggles in promoting GFL, hesitance due to limited knowledge, and doubts about its necessity. To cope, participants integrated GFL into classroom practices, fostered inclusivity while respecting cultural diversity, utilized available resources, and emphasized institutional support in advancing GFL use. Their insights highlighted the role of inclusive language in fostering belongingness, providing professional development, and strengthening institutional policies that promote gender sensitivity. Overall, the research underscores the need for sustained institutional support, professional development, and policy reinforcement to help educators model inclusive communication and to foster a learning environment that challenges gender bias and promotes equality in higher education.

KEYWORDS: Gender-Fair Language, Inclusive Language, GAD, Phenomenology, Local College, State College, Higher Education, English Teachers, Davao de Oro, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Language is powerful. It can reflect the changes brought by time. It also serves as a vital tool in shaping an equitable and inclusive society. In the area of education, where inclusivity and diversity are tirelessly promoted, the language used by educators is significantly influential for students and society as a whole. Frequently, words unconsciously mirror preconceived and incorrect notions about gender roles; thus, gender discrimination is activated by gender-related words even when it is unintentional. This is also present in the English language. Although it is generally considered a genderless language, it has masculine-feminine gendered distinctions and a system of pronouns in its lexicon. Several campaigns and government policies for the integration of gender-fair language in higher education all over the country continue to emerge. However, many educators still struggle to adhere to its integration in teaching.

Baksi et al. (2021) conducted a study in India which found that the existing curriculum does not adequately reinforce the use of gender-neutral or gender-fair language, indicating a limited integration of gender-inclusive vocabulary at the foundational level of education. This results in the proliferation of stereotypes and gender stigmas. Similarly, the study of Phaharadz and

Shaari (2021) in Malaysia highlighted that many of the participants acknowledged the presence of sexist or gender-biased language as opposed to gender-fair language. However, due to its deep-rooted integration within the culture, many inadvertently employ sexist language, particularly when addressing women. The issue is also evident in China in the study of Yang and Zhang (2021). The results showed that more effort is required to support their L2 (second language) learners' gender-fair language use and that when it comes to L2 English teaching and learning, the emphasis has to move from "accuracy" to "appropriateness."

In the Philippines, particularly in Manila, Tarroyo (2022) stated that although progress has been made in implementing policies promoting the usage of gender-fair language (GFL) within and beyond the classroom, many teachers and students continue to experience challenges in addressing topics related to gender identity, expression, and gender-nonconforming terminology. Moreover, the context of Philippine English language teaching (ELT) was highlighted in this study. Similarly, Gamboa et al. (2022) found that while teachers in Pampanga show awareness of gender-fair language (GFL), its actual application in classroom settings remains limited, primarily due to the perceived relevance



of the lesson content and the students' level of proficiency. The researchers concluded that it is essential to perform widespread dissemination, such as through capability training on the usage of GFL, in light of these findings.

Meanwhile, based on my first-hand observation during our benchmarking in several schools in Davao de Oro, I have noticed that in some school documents and even during class discussions, although sometimes used, GFL was not yet fully integrated. In my engagement with some of the teachers, many have mentioned that although they are aware of the integration of GFL in teaching, students and teachers still unconsciously go back to the traditional way of using the language. This means that the use of GFL only becomes optional in their daily undertakings in school and further revisitation and revision of the instruction is needed.

Similar studies are focusing on gender-fair language. Various authors explored more gendered languages such as Swedish (Vergoossen et al., 2020), German, and Norwegian (Kuhn, 2021). In the educational context, especially in the Philippines, only very few, and often with the participation of the same author have navigated GFL. Tarrayo et al. (2021) and Tarrayo (2022) researched GFL in higher education. Hence, there is a noticeable gap in the literature focusing on Filipino English language teaching (ELT), especially regarding the integration of gender perspectives. This means that GFL in the classroom has remained underexplored. In addition, there is a dearth of literature related to this issue in the Mindanao area, as the abovementioned studies were set in Luzon despite the government's country-wide campaign for the integration of GFL in education. Thus, this study attempts to bridge these gaps in the literature.

Further, this study underscores the critical role that English teachers embody in influencing linguistic choices. This also recognizes the imperative to address and rectify language-related disparities and contribute to the ongoing discourse on inclusivity and equity within the educational area. The use of Gender-Fair or Gender-Sensitive Language is mandated by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED); hence, it has to be integrated into every educational institution. The findings of this study have the potential to facilitate pedagogical strategies, curricular development, and institutional policies that can positively impact educational institutions and contribute to the broader societal goal of fostering gender equality and inclusivity. Thus, this study can be shared through a research forum and likewise can be a reference for future related studies through its publication.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The phenomenological study sought to unveil and comprehend the practices, experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights of English instructors in Davao de Oro in integrating gender-fair language (GFL) in classroom instruction. Moreover, this study aims to explore the integration of GFL in teaching as well as its reasons, ways, challenges, and benefits.

At this stage in the research, gender-fair language (GFL) practices were generally defined as the intentional usage of language that

intentionally eliminates gender bias, promoting inclusivity by recognizing and addressing both genders or all genders in a non-stereotypical manner.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the lived experiences of English teachers in integrating Gender-fair language practices in the classroom?
2. How do the English teachers cope with the challenges they encountered in integrating Gender-fair language practices in the classroom?
3. What are the insights of English teachers in integrating Gender-fair language practices in the classroom that can be shared with others?

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research design, specifically using a phenomenological approach, to achieve an in-depth understanding of a human or social phenomenon. Qualitative research is appropriate when quantitative methods and statistical analyses are insufficient to capture the complexity of an issue, as it focuses on the meanings individuals or groups assign to their experiences. This approach allows researchers to interact directly with participants, often in their natural environments such as homes or workplaces and encourages them to share their experiences freely without the constraints of predetermined assumptions or existing theories (Creswell, 2007). The phenomenological design emphasizes understanding the nature and essence of lived experiences from the perspective of those who have encountered the phenomenon. Data are gathered through interviews, narratives, or observations, enabling researchers to examine the core qualities of these experiences. By analyzing participants' lived experiences, the study aims to gain deeper insights into the fundamental nature of the phenomenon under investigation (Connelly, 2010).

Research Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 14 English college instructors drawn from three local colleges and the state college in Davao de Oro. Participants were identified and selected through purposive sampling, with seven engaged in in-depth interviews (IDIs) and the remaining seven participating in a focus group discussion (FGD).

For the selection of participants, the inclusion criteria are the following: (a) they must be English instructors from the three Local Colleges (LUC) or State College (SUC) in Davao de Oro; (b) they must be teaching for at least three years; (c) they must be teaching English in the current school year (2023–2024); (d) they must have experiences in integrating Gender-Fair Language (GFL) in teaching; and (e) they must have undergone seminars or trainings about GAD and the use of GFL in teaching.

Data Analysis

This study utilized thematic analysis as the method for qualitative data analysis. The analysis of qualitative data serves as an



extension of the analytical processes inherent in everyday life. It requires the application of intrinsic critical thinking skills to the dataset, with interpretation inevitably influenced by one's personal, social, and cultural experiences, both past and present (Bazeley, 2013). Using thematic analysis, the data was analyzed inductively, wherein the patterns and themes were established.

Thematic analysis is a systematic approach for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. In this study, I employed Braun and Clarke's six-step process, which includes familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, collating codes into potential themes, reviewing and refining themes, determining the significance of each theme, and reporting the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

RESULTS

Lived Experiences of English Teachers in Integrating Gender-Fair Language Practices in the Classroom

Table 1 shows the themes and core ideas on the lived experiences of English teachers in integrating gender-fair language practices in the classroom. Four themes emerged in the analysis: (a) positive shifts and awareness in gender-fair language and gender diversity, (b) struggles in promoting gender-fair language, (c) doubts on the necessity of gender-fair language use, and (d) unfamiliarity and limited knowledge of gender-fair language use.

Table 1

Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Lived Experiences of English Teachers in Integrating Gender-Fair Language Practices in the Classroom

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Positive Shifts and Awareness in Gender-Fair Language and Gender Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> made mindful changes in educational content by ensuring inclusivity in language use observed awareness and sensitivity towards gender diversity became more intentional in language choices by expanding vocabulary and avoiding gendered language observed students actively applying gender-fair language experienced fulfillment in fostering inclusivity by observing increased student respect and empathy noted positive impact in class on fostering inclusivity and respect
Struggles in Promoting Gender-Fair Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> encountered resistance from teachers and students due to unawareness of gender-fair language's importance faced institutional barriers due to unclear policies encountered challenges in promoting among students due to lack of exposure needed more resources and institutional support due to scarce materials and GAD efforts struggled to break long-established language patterns due to habitual usage recognized the tendency to revert to traditional language usage when not emphasized faced challenges when correcting sexist language recognized the challenge of balancing grammar and inclusivity
Doubts on the Necessity of Gender-Fair Language Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> perceived gender-fair language as complicated or unnecessary expressed confusion and hesitation about its importance expected hesitation due to students perceiving it as merely a trend felt discomfort and awkwardness when using gender-fair language
Unfamiliarity and Limited Knowledge of Gender-Fair Language Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> hesitated to use gender-fair language due to unfamiliarity and lack of understanding felt a lack of confidence in enforcing gender-fair language due to limited knowledge observed cultural norms and religious beliefs affecting students' understanding noted students' difficulty in using gender-fair language due to term unfamiliarity



Coping Mechanism of English Teachers in Dealing with the Challenges of Integrating Gender-Fair Language Practices in the Classroom

For the second research question, participants were asked how they cope with the challenges associated with the integration of gender-fair language practices. Table 2 presents the coping mechanisms employed by English teachers in addressing these

challenges within the classroom. Through careful analysis of the data, five major themes were identified, such as (a) embedding gender-fair language in instruction and classroom practices, (b) promoting inclusivity while respecting cultural diversity, (c) overcoming resistance through dialogue and respect, (d) utilizing resources and designing inclusive learning experiences, and (e) fostering institutional policy support for cultural sensitivity.

Table 2

Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Coping Mechanism of English Teachers in Integrating Gender-Fair Language Practices in the Classroom

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Embedding Gender-Fair Language in Instruction and Classroom Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • implementing interactive activities for exposure to and practice of gender-fair language • reinforcing usage through constant reminders and practice • embedding gender-fair language to ensure inclusivity and instructional balance • fostering awareness of language evolution to advance equality and social justice
Promoting Inclusivity while Respecting Cultural Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • balancing cultural preservation with the adaptation of inclusive language • emphasizing respect to foster understanding and harmony in a culturally diverse classroom • educating oneself to navigate cultural differences enhance gender-fair language use • being sensitive to diversity to prevent discrimination
Overcoming Resistance through Dialogue and Respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • addressing resistance with empathy and open dialogue to promote understanding • educating others on the evolution and importance of language for its acceptance • engaging in self-reflection in unlearning sexist language by embracing growth and understanding • creating an inclusive and respectful environment by fostering openness and sensitivity
Utilizing Resources and Designing Inclusive Learning Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consulting reading materials and guidelines to educate oneself and promote inclusivity • utilizing online and social media resources to access information and raise awareness on GFL • empowering educators through research to advance gender-fair language practices • integrating multimedia to support gender-fair language learning
Fostering Institutional Policy Support for Cultural Sensitivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • aligning classroom practices with institutional policies by ensuring inclusivity in discussions and activities. • advancing awareness of gender-fair language through education while reinforcing institutional responsibility. • recognizing institutional support in fostering inclusivity to strengthen inclusive language practices • collaborating with colleagues and institutional connections to share experiences, strategies, and resources



Insights Drawn from the Experiences of English Teachers in Integrating Gender-Fair Language Practices in the Classroom

In this third research question, the participants shared their insights from their experiences in integrating gender-fair

language practices in the classroom. The analysis revealed four themes: (a) provide professional development and support, (b) institutionalize gender-fair language, (c) foster inclusivity through gender-fair language, and (d) model inclusive communication in teaching.

Table 3
Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Insights of English Teachers in Integrating Gender-Fair Language Practices in the Classroom

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Provide Professional Development and Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • promote inclusive teaching through continuous professional growth • expand knowledge and understanding through active participation • provide training and resources to support implementation • enhance implementation through proper training and information • build connection and collaboration through training platforms
Institutionalize Gender-Fair Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • start small and gradually adapt by making manageable changes • facilitate subtle integration of gender-fair language through natural use in communication tasks • formulate and enforce policies that address gender issues and promote inclusivity • enhance visibility and representation through campus displays and online platforms • conduct research to assess the impact of gender-fair language practices
Foster Inclusivity through Gender Fair-Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use language to create inclusive learning environment by fostering belongingness and equality • balance linguistic and inclusivity needs by integrating inclusive language with grammar instruction • highlight the role of language in fostering inclusivity through discussions, examples, and practice • keep an open mind and embrace learning by unlearning biases and adapting to language changes
Model Inclusive Communication in Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exemplify gender-fair language for student emulation • influence language use by modeling it naturally and without coercion • model consistent usage by integrating inclusive terms in interactions and communications • integrate gender-fair language by addressing gendered terms in materials and discussions

DISCUSSION

Implications for Teaching Practice

Gender-fair language has emerged as a critical element in promoting equity and inclusivity within society. Its purpose is to minimize bias in communication by avoiding expressions that reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes. In education, language plays a pivotal role in shaping students' understanding of gender, social relationships, and inclusivity, making its deliberate use essential in fostering equitable learning environments. Despite policies and campaigns encouraging GFL integration at the institutional level, teachers continue to face challenges in applying inclusive language within classroom interactions and academic documents. These challenges,

including habitual use of gendered terms, limited familiarity with inclusive terminology, institutional constraints, and varying levels of student awareness, highlight the complexity of adopting GFL in the classroom setting and underscore the need to explore how educators experience, cope with, and gain insights from its integration.

The lived experiences of English teachers revealed both the benefits and the challenges associated with integrating gender-fair language. Participants reported heightened awareness of gender diversity, intentional selection of inclusive terms, and a sense of fulfillment when students demonstrated respectful and inclusive communication. Conversely, they encountered



resistance from students and colleagues, limited availability of inclusive teaching materials, and difficulty in unlearning traditional language habits embedded in institutional documents and classroom discourse. These findings suggest that teaching practice in higher education can be strengthened by revising academic documents, instructional resources, and communication materials to remove gender-biased expressions, incorporating participatory activities such as discussions and case analyses focused on inclusivity, and engaging in reflective practices to model equitable language consistently.

Participants also employed practical coping mechanisms to address challenges in promoting gender-fair language. These included embedding inclusive terminology within lectures and written materials, utilizing multimedia and online resources to reinforce exposure, facilitating open dialogue to address resistance, and balancing inclusivity with cultural and institutional norms. These strategies indicate that higher education teachers can operationalize inclusive language by introducing gender-fair examples in academic documents, integrating inclusive terms in classroom discussions, and encouraging students to engage in self-reflection regarding their own language use. These approaches support the development of a classroom culture that values inclusivity and respect, fostering student awareness of equitable communication.

Lastly, participants' insights highlight the importance of modeling and institutionalizing gender-fair language in higher education. Teachers emphasized continuous professional growth, consistent demonstration of inclusive communication, and gradual integration of changes in routine academic practices. These findings suggest that teaching practice should prioritize incremental adoption of inclusive language, repeated student exposure, and collaboration among educators to share effective strategies. Professional development programs, including GAD seminars, workshops, and training sessions, enhance teachers' knowledge, confidence, and skills in applying GFL. In addition, institutional mechanisms such as clear guidelines, policies, and reinforced mandates can support its systematic integration. Through these efforts, educators can foster learning environments characterized by respect, equity, and inclusivity, while using language mindfully to develop students' awareness and communication skills, enhancing both classroom culture and academic quality.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study has successfully uncovered the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights of English instructors in Davao de Oro in their use of gender-fair language (GFL) in the classroom. While it examined the reasons, approaches, challenges, and benefits of integrating GFL, its scope was limited to a small group of participants from selected local colleges and branches of a state college.

Future research should include a wider range of participants from different educational institutions and disciplines, not only English

instructors but also teachers from other subject areas. Broader representation may capture more diverse perspectives and yield practical outcomes such as inclusive teaching materials, faculty development programs, or institutional policies that strengthen the practice of GFL across the academe.

Follow-up interviews with specific participants would be useful for assessing the stability of their views and experiences, especially as GAD initiatives continue to be implemented in higher education settings. Such efforts could provide a clearer picture of how teachers adapt over time and may result in more grounded recommendations for integration into academic policies, instructional materials, and classroom communication.

Moreover, conducting further studies particularly on the perspectives of participants, whether teachers or students, with different gender identities toward the integration of GFL is also recommended. This may reveal how acceptance, resistance, or neutrality varies depending on gender, and could provide a more nuanced understanding of how inclusive language is received in the academe. A good result of this inquiry would be the development of gender-sensitive strategies and communication practices that address specific concerns of diverse groups.

Another area for further exploration is the tension between inclusive language, particularly GFL, and traditional grammatical rules. Since this study only surfaced part of this issue, future research focusing on this concern among English language teachers could lead to strategies or instructional resources that harmonize inclusivity with grammatical standards. This would support educators in delivering lessons effectively while still promoting gender-fair practices.

It is also recommended that higher education institutions conduct internal studies on GFL integration. These can assess the readiness of faculty and students to embrace inclusive practices, serving as a basis for interventions, training programs, or policy formulation. Such initiatives would not only promote acceptance of inclusive language but also align with CHED's GAD compliance requirements.

Lastly, since this study concentrated on higher education, future research could investigate the use of GFL in basic education, where gender-related policies are more strictly mandated. Exploring this context may lead to the development of age-appropriate communication strategies and learning materials that normalize inclusivity at an early stage, helping foster a more respectful and inclusive generation of learners.

Concluding Remarks

This study has successfully uncovered the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights of the participants in integrating gender-fair language (GFL) into their teaching practices, while also exploring its underlying reasons, approaches, challenges, and benefits. The findings underscored not only the positive impacts of GFL on inclusivity and diversity but also the complexities and



hesitations that accompany its integration. Indeed, this research highlights the power of language in shaping educational spaces that value respect and representation.

In undertaking this study, I was reminded of my earlier frustrations as a researcher, particularly in my undergraduate thesis where the pursuit of language change was met with resistance. This experience reinforced the reality that meaningful change often encounters hesitation, yet education continues to be a vital avenue for awareness, acceptance, and transformation.

Like many research journeys, this one was not without challenges. While I initially aimed to complete it within the expected timeframe, personal circumstances—including a period of profound loss—extended the process. Such experiences, though difficult, shaped my approach and reminded me that research is not merely about producing results but also about enduring the process with patience and resilience.

The process of transcribing, analyzing data, and reviewing related studies also presented considerable challenges. There were moments when the weight of the work amplified my self-doubt, yet I gradually learned to persevere. With the guidance of my two advisers, who consistently offered clarity and direction, I was able to move through each phase of the research and eventually see progress. Looking back, I find it humbling to realize how I was able to move beyond hesitation and complete this study with independence. Although I often carry the tendency to rush tasks, this journey has taught me the value of patience and the gradual process of growth.

Ultimately, this study not only contributes to the discourse on gender-fair language and inclusivity in education but also reflects my growth as a researcher. It has taught me that education is as much about intellectual rigor as it is about humility, perseverance, and openness to change. Through this process, I have come to value not only the findings of the study but also the journey that led to its completion.

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