

# The Influence of Gender on English Language Proficiency among University Students

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## ABSTRACT

The idea that men and women are different in their ability to communicate has been one of the most popular beliefs about gender differences that exists to this day. Men and women have different styles in using a language to communicate, whether it is with words, tone of voice, emotional expression, or body language. Gender is an important factor in the acquisition and learning of any language. This study analyzed the influence of gender on the use of adjectives, to determine the influence of gender on the use of etiquette words and to analyze the relationship between gender and emotional expressions among the university students. The study employed correlation research design. The target population was the Chuka University undergraduate students. A sample size of 240 students was drawn from both genders. Cluster sampling was used to select students proportionate to the population size i.e., first year to fourth year students. Random sampling was used to select female and male students from the various academic years. Data collection was carried out by use of questionnaires. Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS version 26. The results were presented in tables, and descriptive statistics such as percentages and frequencies. The study showed a positive and statistically significant ( $p= 0.451$ ,  $r= 0.001$ ) relationship between gender and the use of adjectives. It further indicated a positive and statistically significant ( $p=0.560$ ,  $r=0.000$ ) relationship between gender and emotional expression. The study also showed a positive and statistically significant ( $p=0.021$ ,  $r=0.000$ ) relationship between gender and etiquette. The study concluded that male and female languages are quite different. The difference occurs mostly in adjectives, emotional expressions and etiquette. The study recommended that various learning institutions should conduct language seminars and workshops to enrich English and other language proficiency among the students.

**Key Words:** English Language Proficiency, Gender, Schools

## INTRODUCTION

Gender is an important factor in the acquisition and learning of a language (Rodina et al., 2020). The idea that men and women are different in their ability to communicate has been one of the most popular beliefs about gender differences that exists to this day (Merchant, 2012). Gender difference in communication has become important topics for discussion recently since the notion about ‘women’s language’ (Lakoff, 1976). This notion emphasized that men and women have different styles in using a language to communicate. Whether it is with words, tone of voice, emotional expression, or body language, the way in which males and females communicate have been explored in a variety of ways to distinguish the characteristics that makes them different (Makhmudov, 2020). It may seem obvious that males and females tend to use different communication styles. It is commonly generalized that females communicate in a more indirect, elaborate, and emotional, sense that can reflect uncertainty, tentativeness, and a lack of authority while males are perceived to have a communication style that is direct, succinct, and instrumental (von Hippel et al., 2011).

According to May et al. (2019), women tend to use tag questions, rising intonations, intensifiers, etc. Although it may seem that the female communication style might be the weaker form, it can also be said that females are more able to establish a rapport that encourages response because of their ability to empathize and connect (Mahmud & Nur, 2018). While males' conversational style usually centers around their own independence, female communication style reflects their need for connectedness (von Hippel et al., 2011). Women tend to place a greater value towards these skills emphasizing the importance of communication that expresses feelings and emotions. Men, on the other hand, place a higher importance on active forms of communication such as persuasion and narrative techniques (Obidovna, 2022). One area in which the disparity in communication styles can lead to inequality is simply based on schools and the workplace. Gender-based misconceptions that reinforce stereotypes about women being less competent than men can cause women's capabilities in leadership to be undervalued (von Hippel et al., 2011). Many gender stereotypes tend to lead to a way of thinking that show men and women maintain different traits and attributes and that the traits that males have are more highly valued than the traits that females possess (Merchant, 2012). In general, the traits associated with males are perceived as more important for educational and professional success.

## LITERATURE

Research that focuses on sex-role stereotypes can influence perceptions based on gender alone, whereas a certain behavior from a male could be perceived in a positive light but when the same behavior is performed by a female it can be viewed as negative (Steckler, & Rosenthal, 1985). Many people do not believe that large differences between how the sexes communicate exist and that continuing the research that explores these differences (Disch, 2009). The differences in the words used by the genders, the tone of voice, and the way emotions are expressed can cause some forms of misunderstanding in communication (Boussalis et al., 2021). According to Gygax et al. (2019), the way in which men and women communicate, whether through verbal or nonverbal means, can present differences in how the speaker and the addressee are perceived. It is well documented in research and history that women and men process emotions differently, that is, women are more emotional than men (Obidovna, 2022). Women are expected to be more relationship oriented while men are assertive and even overtly aggressive. Overall, women claim to be more emotionally expressive, more emotionally responsive and more empathetic (Steen & Shinkai, 2020). According to Evans et al. (2019), women express their feelings without constraint, except for the emotion of anger. Women express more love, fear, and sadness. Men are overwhelmed by women's expressions of emotion and express more anger. Men control their feelings and restrain from expressing them.

According to Mahmud (2018), gender differences are important aspect to be considered in English language. One major difference between male and female communication style is in the amount of emotion that is used in their conversations (Obidovna, 2022). Men and women are socially different in that society lays down different social roles for them and expects different behavior patterns from them (Swim et al., 2020). Language simply reflects this social fact. Gendered cultural norms such as emotional expression and communication styles are both learned in childhood through interactions with family members and friends (Mahmud, 2018). Specifically, conversations that students have with their peers help them learn appropriate emotional responses which develop their socio-cognitive understanding. Female use adjectives, adverbs, diminutives, and pronouns, and male use swear words. In speech modulation, male tend to ask something directly, while female tend to be more polite (Aisah & Fatmasari, 2020). While speaking, female use interrogative sentences and correctness of grammar and male use imperative sentences (Prabha & Raja, 2021).

Gender is one of the most basic criteria of classifying people into groups. Gender difference plays a vital role in the growth of linguistic abilities in children. In similar environmental conditions, gender difference in language learning is clearly visible. Language processing is abstract in female and more sensory in male. Female naturally had a superior ability to pick up verbal fluency and better at articulating than male because female have a wider vocabulary than their male counterparts in their mental lexicon. It is commonly believed that women are expressive and emotional, while men are self-asserting and power-oriented in the use of language. Women tend to place a greater value towards these skills emphasizing the importance of communication that expresses feelings and emotions. Men, on the other hand, place a higher importance on active forms of communication such as persuasion and narrative techniques. This shows a difference in the way men and women speak English language. Men tend to be less proficient while speaking and their

command of English Language is not as strong as that of women. This means male gender is faced by some shortcomings in the way they communicate in English language. This, study, therefore, intended to study the relationship between gender and English language among the students. The objectives of the study included; To analyse the influence of gender on the use of adjectives among the university students, To determine the influence of gender on the use of etiquette words among the university students and To analyse the relationship between gender and emotional expressions among the university students

## METHODOLOGY

### Research design

We used correlation research design to describe the relationship between the variables (Ary et al., 2018).

### Target Population

The target population in this study was the university students across the four-year levels. i.e the first, second, third- and fourth-year students at Chuka University.

### Sample Size

The sample size was drawn from university students, both male and female gender from the first to the fourth year. The following formula by Morgan (1970) was used to calculate the sample size for the study,

$$n = \frac{X^2 N p (1 - p)}{d^2 (N - 1) + X^2 p (1 - p)}$$

where,

N= Total population.

n= Sample size.

$X^2$ = Table value of Chi-Square with one degree freedom and at 95% confidence interval, giving 1.96.

p = the proportion in the target population estimated to have characteristics being measured.

d = the degree of accuracy expressed as a proportion (0.05)

$$n = \frac{1.96^2 \times 12000 \times 0.8 \times 0.2}{0.05^2 (12000 - 1) + 1.96^2 \times 0.8 \times 0.2} = 240$$

The sample size was 240 university students.

### Sampling Procedure

We employed cluster sampling to select students proportionate to the population size in the university. The students were grouped into four clusters that included, first, second, third- and fourth-year students. Random sampling was then used to select students from each year.

### Analysis

We cleaned the data and coded for analysis. We used SPSS version 26 f to analyze descriptive and inferential statistics.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Response Rate

The study had a sample size of 240 respondents. This represents 90.8% return rate which was a good percentage for descriptive statistics.

Table 1. Response Rate

Respondents	Sample size	Returned	Percent %
First years	55	46	83.6
Second years	59	52	88.1
Third years	62	56	90.3
Fouth years	64	64	100
Total	240	218	90.8

Response Rate

### Gender

The study sought to establish the gender composition of the respondents. The results were analysed and the tabulated in the table 2.

Table 2. Gender Distribution

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	108	49.54
Female	110	50.46
Total	218	100

Female gender formed the highest percentage (50.46%) as compared to the male counterparts.

### Students' knowledge on adjectives

The study sought to establish whether the students were well conversant with the use of adjectives as a means of English language proficiency. The results were analysed and presented in the table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics on the students' knowledge on the use of adjectives

	Frequency	Percent %
Yes	162	74.3
No	56	25.7
Total	218	100

Descriptive statistics on the students' knowledge on the use of adjectives

A greater percentage (74.3%) of the university students are well knowledgeable on the uses of adjectives.

### Students' Frequency on the use of the Listed Adjectives

We sought to establish students' knowledge of adjectives as a means of English language proficiency. The results were analysed and presented in the table 4.

Table 4. Students' frequency on the use of the listed adjectives

Adjectives		None	Rarely	Occasional	All time
Lovely	F	41	60	98	19
	%	18.8	27.5	45	8.7
Gorgeous	F	73	51	49	45
	%	33.5	23.4	22.5	20.6
Adorable	F	69	35	88	31
	%	31.7	16	40.4	14.2
Beautiful	F	45	50	78	45
	%	20.7	22.9	35.8	20.6
Delicious	F	40	25	95	58
	%	18.3	11.5	43.6	26.6
Brave	F	25	35	88	70
	%	11.5	16.0	40.4	32.11
Handsome	F	35	40	60	77
	%	16.0	18.3	27.5	35.3

Students' frequency on the use of the listed adjectives

A greater percentage (45%) of students indicated usage of the adjective lovely. At least 31.7 % of the respondents were likely not to have interacted with the adjective adorable.

### Spearman's Rank correlation between Gender and the use of adjectives

The study sought to determine the relationship between Gender and the use of adjectives. Spearman's Rank correlation was used to determine the strength of the relationship between the two. The results were as tabulated 5.

Table 5. Spearman's Rank correlation between Gender and the use of adjectives

		Gender	Use of adjectives
Gender	Correlation coefficient	1	

	Sig.	0.000	
Use of adjectives	Correlation coefficient	0.451	1
	Sig.	0.001	0.000

Spearman's Rank correlation between Gender and the use of adjectives

The study showed a positive and statistically significant ( $p= 0.451, r= 0.001$ ) relationship between gender and the use of adjectives. Female gender was found to be using adjectives like 'lovely', 'beautiful', 'adorable', 'handsome' etc. more compared to their male counterparts.

### Emotional expression and Gender

The study further sought to establish the relationship between emotional expression and the students' gender. The students were asked to indicate how they express their emotions under different circumstances. The results were analysed and presented in the table 6.

Table 6. Emotional expression and Gender

		Cry	Scream	Speechless	Laugh	smile	Exclamations
Surprised	F	65	49	30	19	35	20
	%	29.8	22.5	13.8	8.7	16.0	9.2
Happy	F	30	45	19	50	60	14
	%	13.8	20.6	8.7	22.9	26.5	6.4
Angry	F	55	29	40	25	54	15
	%	25.2	13.3	18.4	11.5	24.8	6.9
Terrified	F	60	28	61	12	9	48
	%	27.5	12.8	27.9	5.5	4.1	22.0
Fear	F	75	73	30	25	0	15
	%	34.4	33.5	13.8	11.5	0	6.4
Sad	F	90	32	40	11	10	35
	%	41.3	14.7	18.3	5.0	4.6	16.0
Insulted	F	80	33	25	15	30	35
	%	36.7	15.1	11.5	6.9	13.8	16.0

### Emotional expression and Gender

The table indicate how students reacted to different emotional situations as shown. The highest percentage (41.3%) other students indicated that they 'cry' when sad. Furthermore, 36.7% indicated that they cry when insulted. Most of the students expressed their 'happiness' by 'smiling' while most of them (27.9%) remain

speechless when ‘terrified’. A total of 65 (29.8%) students cried when surprised. Only 4.1% smiled when terrified due to confusion and mixed reactions as expressed by different respondents.

### Spearman's Rank Correlation between Gender and Emotional Expression among the University Students

Further, we sought to determine the relationship between Gender and Emotional Expressions. We used Spearman's Rank correlation was used to determine the strength of the relationship between the two. The results were as tabulated 7.

Table 7. Spearman's Rank correlation between Gender and Emotional Expression among the university students

		Gender	Emotional expression
Gender	Correlation coefficient	1	
	Sig.	0.000	
Emotional Expression	Correlation	0.560	1
	Sig.	0.000	0.000

Spearman's Rank correlation between Gender and Emotional Expression among the university students

The study showed a positive and statistically significant ( $p=0.560$ ,  $r=0.000$ ) relationship between gender and emotional expression. Female students were found to express their emotions more than the male students. For example, female students were found to express their happiness, anger, fear, sadness etc. than their male counterparts.

### Etiquette and Gender

The study finally sought to establish the relationship between gender and emotional expression among the university students. The results were as tabulated in table 8.

Table 8. Etiquette and Gender

Etiquette Word		None	Rarely	Occasionally	All time
I'm sorry	F	43	65	40	70
	%	19.7	29.8	18.3	32.1
Thank you	F	40	35	75	68
	%	18.3	16.0	34.4	31.2
Excuse me	F	75	40	65	38
	%	34.4	18.3	29.8	17.4
Please	F	30	81	50	57
	%	13.8	37.2	22.9	26.1

You're welcome	F	50	65	63	49
	%	22.9	29.8	28.9	22.5
Pardon	F	80	65	33	40
	%	36.7	29.8	15.1	18.3
May I	F	77	35	63	43
	%	35.3	16.0	28.9	19.7

### Etiquette and Gender

From the results, a total of 81 students (37.2%) rarely used etiquette word 'please'. A greater percent (31.2%) used the etiquette word thank you. A higher percentage (36.7%) of the respondents have never used the etiquette pardon. A good number of respondents of 75 (34.4%) were well conversant with the etiquette word 'thank you' and 'Excuse Me'.

### Spearman's Rank correlation between Gender and Etiquette among the university students

We used Spearman's Rank correlation to determine the strength of the relationship between the two. The results were as tabulated below.

Table 9. Spearman's Rank correlation between Gender and Etiquette among the university students

		Gender	Etiquette
Gender	Correlation coefficient	1	
	Sig	0.000	
Etiquette	Correlation coefficient	0.021	1
	Sig.	0.000	0.000

### Spearman's Rank correlation between Gender and Etiquette among the university students

The study showed a positive and statistically significant ( $p=0.021$ ,  $r=0.000$ ) relationship between gender and etiquette. However, the relationship was not very strong. The female students were found to use etiquette words like 'excuse me', 'may I', 'Thank you' etc. more than the male gender.

## SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The study established that a higher percentage (41.3%) of students used English as their communication language. More than 74.3% of the students are well conversant with the use of adjectives while only 25.7% had no ideas about the adjectives use. A total of 98 (45%) of the students used the adjective 'lovely' occasionally while 40.4% used the adjective 'adorable'. The adjective 'gorgeous' was the least used as shown by (33.5%) of the students. The adjective 'handsome' was used by students all time as compared to other adjectives like 'lovely', 'delicious' etc. Spearman's rank correlation showed a positive and statistically significant relationship between gender and the use if adjectives.

Most students expressed their emotions by crying when sad (41.3%) while 36.7% cry while insulted. Several of them, (27.9%) indicate remain speechless when terrified. Additionally, 29.8% of the students cry when



surprised. Spearman's Rank correlation showed a positive and statistically significant relationship between gender and emotional expression among the university students.

The study finally sought to determine the relationship between gender and etiquette among the students. Approximately 81 students (37.2%) rarely used etiquette word 'please' while a greater percent (31.2%) used the etiquette word 'thank you'. A higher percentage (36.7%) of the respondents had never used the word 'pardon'. Spearman's Rank correlation showed a positive and statistically significant relationship between gender and etiquette among the university students.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study concluded that more students were well conversant with adjectives. Female students used adjectives like 'lovely', 'delicious', beautiful', 'handsome' more than their male counterparts. In the second objective, the study concluded that female students were prone to express their emotions more than their male counterparts. Finally, the relationship between gender and etiquette was clearly indicated by the weak correlation coefficient. This meant that gender did not influence much the use of etiquette words amongst the university students. However, female students were found to use etiquette words more than the male students. From the research study, the male and female languages are quite different. This difference occurs mostly in adjectives, emotional expressions and etiquette. The following are the major recommendations;

1. The study recommends that various learning institutions should conduct language seminars and workshops to enrich English and other language proficiency among the students.
2. Secondly, the study recommends the need to enrich communication skills content and materials for study, at the same time encouraging the students to take the unit seriously and not just as a 'common' unit that's not very necessary.
3. Finally, the study recommends involvement of students in class presentation, school seminars and other activities that encourage English language proficiency.

**Ethical Approval:** This work was done after obtaining research permission form Chuka University Research Ethics Committee. All the data was kept confidential and purely used for research purposes.

**Conflict of Interest:** We declare that there was no conflict of interest

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