

The Perceptions of Communication Patterns among Undergraduate Students of Bachelor's Degree in English Language in Their Social Settings

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.102100002>

Received: 27 June 2026; Accepted: 02 July 2026; Published: 24 July 2026

ABSTRACT

The present investigation evaluates the interactional paradigms of undergraduate cohorts specializing in English for Intercultural Communication (EIC) and English for Professional Communication (EPC) at UiTM Shah Alam across informal interpersonal domains. Anchored in foundational interpersonal communication frameworks and socio-environmental contexts, this research assesses how academic specialization, gender variables, and localized social settings mediate daily peer-to-peer engagement. Adopting a structured quantitative methodology, this study utilized comprehensive survey instruments to analyze five core dimensions: interaction frequency, modality types, environmental contexts, behavioral habits, and perceived communicative success. Rigorous statistical evaluations, encompassing Independent Samples T-tests and One-Way ANOVA, were performed on a participant pool of $N = 160$. Empirical results reveal that female participants demonstrate markedly higher interactional engagement metrics compared to their male peers, with EPC students further exceeding the scores of those in the EIC stream. Conversely, the absence of significant longitudinal variance suggests a developmental stabilization across the undergraduate academic lifecycle. These findings provide academic administrators and educators with critical empirical evidence to refine programmatic design and enhance communicative proficiency within non-Western higher education landscapes.

Keywords: social settings, UiTM Shah Alam, students, contrast, communication patterns.

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication skills are fundamental to establishing interpersonal relationships and navigating academic, professional, and social environments. Within higher education institutions like Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam, undergraduate students enrolled in specialized language programs—such as English for Intercultural Communication (EIC) and English for Professional Communication (EPC)—rely on nuanced interaction strategies to collaborate across diverse social settings. The operational success of these information exchanges is determined by several systemic dimensions, including the frequency of

interaction, chosen modalities, environmental contexts, and ingrained communication habits. The way undergraduate students communicate with each other is of significant importance in both determining their social interactions and experiences as well as shaping the context in which they learn.

Sociolinguistic frameworks have historically demonstrated that communication patterns are profoundly mediated by gender dynamics and situational environments (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 2005). Early foundational paradigms posited that gender differences emerge from distinct childhood socialization patterns, leading men to adopt assertive, competitive communication behaviors, while women prioritize cooperative, rapport-building dynamics to sustain social harmony (Maltz & Borker, 2018). Modern sociolinguistic perspectives challenge these rigid binary descriptions, arguing that linguistic choices are highly contextualized actions rather than fixed reflections of biological gender (Cameron, 2007).

While Western literature extensively documents gender-based and context-driven variations in discourse, there is a distinct lack of empirical evaluations within non-Western, highly institutionalized multicultural contexts like Malaysia (Ridgeway, 2009). This study addresses this theoretical and empirical gap by analyzing how undergraduate language students at UiTM Shah Alam navigate social interactions outside formal classrooms. By exploring regular interaction choices, this research provides university educators and academic administrators with actionable insights to bridge peer collaboration barriers, optimize programmatic design, and enhance student communication proficiency.

The underlying problem highlights a persistent challenge in higher education: while universities focus heavily on formal curriculum delivery, they often disregard the informal linguistic environments where actual soft-skill assimilation occurs. When students transition from highly structured classrooms to casual settings like cafeterias, dormitories, and student lounges, their communicative choices adapt to peer-group expectations and deeply ingrained cultural norms. By exploring these patterns among language majors, this study provides an empirical baseline to evaluate whether specialized language training actively influences social interaction styles or remains limited to formal academic settings.

To achieve the primary objectives of this study and resolve the identified gaps in the literature, the following three research questions were formulated to guide the statistical analysis:

1. Is there any statistically significant difference between male and female undergraduate language students at UiTM Shah Alam in terms of their overall English communication usage score in casual social settings?
2. Is there any statistically significant difference between students enrolled in the English for Professional Communication (EPC) program and those in the English for Intercultural Communication (EIC) program regarding their English communication usage scores?
3. Is there any statistically significant difference or variation in English communication usage scores among undergraduate language students when compared across their three distinct years of study (Year 1, Year 2, and Year 3)?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates prominent sociolinguistic and behavioral paradigms to interpret student communication profiles. Early work on language and gender established that women are socialized to employ polite, correct, and less confrontational speech styles (Lakoff, 1975). This conversation baseline is expanded by Tannen's (2005) Genderlect Theory, which claims that men and women operate using distinct conversational dialects. Men utilize "report talk" as a mechanism to negotiate power, protect autonomy, and establish hierarchical status in social structures. Women, conversely, utilize "rapport talk" to form intimate bonds, maintain social networks, and establish deep relational connections.

To avoid the pitfalls of biological essentialism, this study pairs Genderlect Theory with Cameron's (2007) contextual framework. Cameron posits that gendered linguistic choices are not static, innate traits but are fluid, adaptive behaviors shaped entirely by active social contexts and environmental conditions. Furthermore, Sheese and Beaulieu's (2009) cultural approach highlights that sub-groups develop micro-cultures with specific conversational codes. These theoretical orientations are supported by empirical studies that treat language variations as systemic reflections of larger societal structures (Argamon et al., 2003; Newman et al., 2008; Ridgeway, 2009).

Gender-Based Communication Patterns

Empirical literature shows clear distinctions in peer interaction choices based on gender. Male students often utilize assertive, competitive, and task-oriented conversational methods to establish status and preserve authority during social interactions (Cameron, 2007; Tannen, 2006). Their interaction groups frequently feature competitive dialogue where direct lexical choices dominate.

In contrast, female students favor collaborative, empathetic, and rapport-driven interaction formats. They use language to build networks, maintain unity, and minimize social friction through indirect structures and mitigating cues (Lakoff, 1975; Ridgeway, 2009). These patterns also extend to nonverbal behaviors; research by Maltz and Borker (2018) indicates that childhood socialization instills specific nonverbal habits, with men adopting dominant stances and women employing nurturing cues. Similarly, Alatraste (2015) and Broos (2005) observe that men prioritize content details, while women prioritize relational nuances in everyday communication.

Academic Specialisation and the Malaysian Context

An individual's academic orientation serves as a key indicator of their behavioral choices. Professional language tracks (EPC) focus on structured, outcome-driven, and corporate communication frameworks. Intercultural language tracks (EIC) focus on context decoding, cultural empathy, and pluralistic adaptability.

Most studies analysing these programmatic effects originate from Western countries, limiting their application to Malaysia, where collectivist social structures heavily influence language choices (Tajuddin et al., 2013). In the Malaysian context, communication choices are governed by macro-societal expectations like *budi bahasa* (courtesy) and the preservation of *air muka* (social face), which require balanced, face-saving conversational tactics. This study fills this gap by evaluating how gender, program specialisation, and academic seniority interact to shape the communication profiles of language undergraduates at UiTM Shah Alam.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Setting

This study utilised a quantitative survey design to capture, evaluate, and compare student communication choices. The research was conducted at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam, a premier public university in Malaysia. This setting provides an ideal ecosystem for analyzing peer communication patterns due to its diverse student body from various socio-demographic backgrounds (Tajuddin et al., 2013).

Sample and Sampling Technique

The target population comprised undergraduate language students from the EPC and EIC programs within the Academy of Language Studies. While the initial research layout targeted a balanced quota of 100 students, the final realized sample size consisted of $N = 160$ participants, which provided enhanced statistical power for T-tests and ANOVA operations (Field, 2013).

The sample distribution included:

- **Gender:** 53 Male participants (33.1%) and 107 Female participants (66.9%).

- **Program Track:** 86 Professional track (EPC) students and 74 Intercultural track (EIC) students.
- **Academic Cohort:** 46 Year 1 students, 51 Year 2 students, and 63 Year 3 students.

A combination of quota sampling was applied to guarantee group representation by gender, alongside convenience sampling based on participant availability across major campus hubs (Bryman, 2016; Fowler, 2013).

Research Instrument

Data were collected via a structured questionnaire adapted from validated marital and gender communication instruments (Heavey et al., 1995; Noller & White, 1990). Section A gathered baseline demographics (age, gender, year of study, faculty). Sections B through F utilized a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), to measure five core behavioral dimensions:

- **Communication Frequency:** Daily peer interactions and participation in group activities.
- **Communication Types:** Selection of verbal, nonverbal, written, visual, or social media channels.
- **Context of Communication:** Spatial preferences (classrooms, cafeterias, dormitories, study groups, gatherings) and comfort levels.
- **Communication Styles:** Use of direct, indirect, formal, or casual interaction types.
- **Perceived Effectiveness:** Self-reported clarity, mutual understanding, and social proficiency.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The instrument was validated by communication experts and pilot-tested to refine item wording (Heavey et al., 1995). Internal reliability was confirmed via Cronbach's alpha computation, exceeding the standard threshold ($\alpha \geq 0.70$), verifying internal consistency (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Questionnaires were distributed over a two-month period using printed forms in high-traffic campus zones (cafeterias, libraries) and digital forms via university social media and learning networks. Data analysis was executed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics summarized sample demographics, while inferential analysis applied Independent Samples T-tests to examine gender and program differences, and a One-Way ANOVA to test variance across years of study (Field, 2018; Pallant, 2020).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Gender-Based Variations in English Communication Usage

An Independent Samples T-test was executed to evaluate variations in total English communication usage scores between male and female undergraduates. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances indicated that group variances were homogeneous ($F = 3.814$, $p = 0.053$); thus, equal variances were assumed. The test revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups:

Table 1: Group Statistics for Communication Usage Score by Gender

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Male	13	3.06	7.75	1.06
Female	107	7.36	9.45	0.91

The empirical results show that female undergraduate students ($M = 67.36$, $SD = 9.45$) achieve significantly higher communication usage scores than male undergraduates ($M = 63.06$, $SD = 7.75$). While traditional Western paradigms like Tannen's (2005) Genderlect Theory attribute this to a socialized preference for "rapport talk," a localized critique requires evaluating these findings within the Malaysian socio-cultural framework.

In a collectivist society, communication choices are heavily governed by *budi bahasa* (courtesy) and the preservation of *air muka* (social face). The significantly higher scores among female students indicate that they take on the role of "social glue" in informal settings. They use more collaborative, relational verbal cues to manage collective harmony and reduce social friction. Male students, conversely, exhibit lower conversational usage frequencies. This suggests they adhere to more instrumental, low-context, and transactional exchanges, viewing casual environments as spaces for specific information delivery rather than active social networking.

Programmatic Specialty Variations: Professional vs. Intercultural Tracks

To evaluate the impact of academic specialization on conversational interaction choices, an Independent Samples T-test compared EPC and EIC students. Levene's Test reported that equal variances could be assumed ($F = 0.431$, $p = 0.512$). The analysis indicated a highly significant difference in communication usage profiles:

Table 2: Group Statistics for Track Specialisation

Program Track	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Professional (EPC)	86	68.67	8.94	0.96
Intercultural (EIC)	74	62.74	8.33	0.97

Students specialising in English for Professional Communication scored significantly higher ($M = 68.67$, $SD = 8.94$) than those in English for Intercultural Communication ($M = 62.74$, $SD = 8.33$). This pronounced programmatic variance reveals how academic curriculum design directly reshapes informal student behavior.

The EPC track immerses students in outcome-driven, direct, and explicit corporate communication frameworks. This training builds high situational confidence, which spills over into informal social interactions. EPC students become highly comfortable using English as a direct, functional tool in casual environments.

Conversely, the EIC track focuses heavily on cultural empathy, contextual variations, and the complexities of pluralistic communication decoding. This intense awareness of linguistic nuances can paradoxically result in more measured, cautious, and reflective conversational profiles in unstructured social settings. EIC students may step back and observe context, leading to lower active communication usage scores compared to their direct, professional-track peers.

The Linguistic Plateau: Unpacking Academic Seniority

A One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was executed to assess whether English communication usage scores changed as students progressed through their university education (Year 1 vs. Year 2 vs. Year 3).

Year of Study		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval
Year 1	6	6.89	9.53	1.41	64.06 – 69.72
Year 2			9.38	1	62.01 – 67.28

	1	4.65		.31	
Year 3	3	6.27	8.65	1	64.09 – 68.45
Total	60	5.93	9.13	0	64.51 – 67.36
				.72	

Table 3: Descriptive Summary Across Academic Seniority

Table 4: ANOVA Summary Table

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p-value
Between Groups	133.727	2	66.864	0.800	0.451
Within Groups	13,120.516	157	83.570	—	—
Total	13,254.244	159	—	—	—

The ANOVA results indicate no statistically significant difference in communication usage scores across the three year groups: $F(2, 157) = 0.800$, $p = 0.451$. The effect size estimates ($\eta^2 = 0.010$) demonstrate that academic seniority accounts for minimal variance in the dataset. A Tukey HSD post hoc test confirmed that no pairwise comparisons between years reached statistical significance ($p > 0.05$), and all groups fell within a single homogeneous subset.

This lack of structural variance across academic cohorts ($p = 0.451$) reveals a critical structural insight: **formal academic progression alone does not alter or improve casual communication choices**. While students undoubtedly expand their academic vocabulary within credit-hour classes, their everyday, unstructured communication patterns plateau early in their university lifecycle.

This plateau highlights a stark division between academic knowledge and social habit. Outside the classroom—in the cafeteria, dormitories, and student lounges—UiTM undergraduates operate in a multilingual environment where code-switching into casual Malay or "Manglish" serves as the default marker of peer inclusion. English language usage in social spheres does not naturally grow across senior years because students actively choose localized dialects to avoid appearing overly formal or alienated from their peers. Without deliberate, unstructured social immersion frameworks, senior undergraduates remain bound to the same conversational comfort zones they established in their first year.

Research Limitations

While this study offers valuable empirical insights into the sociolinguistic habits of language undergraduates, several methodological constraints must be acknowledged.

The first limitation is that the findings are based on the reliance on self-reported data. The primary limitation stems from the study's reliance on self-reported survey data, which is inherently susceptible to response bias and social desirability effects. Participants may over-report their proficiency or alter their reported conversational styles to align with what they perceive as socially acceptable or academically expected behaviors.

In addition, the research is also constrained in terms of institutional and sample confinement. The geographic and institutional scope of this research is strictly confined to a single institution, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam, and looks exclusively at English language majors. Consequently, the findings may lack immediate generalisability when applied to other universities, non-language disciplines, or broader socio-cultural and regional contexts across Malaysia.

Finally, it has the research limitation of theoretical operationalisation. Although prominent interpersonal communication frameworks (such as Genderlect and Contextual Communication theories) were referenced, the initial research design lacked an explicit, step-by-step roadmap demonstrating how these micro-theories

directly mapped onto the construction of individual items within the survey instrument, slightly limiting the conceptual depth during the early interpretation of the findings.

Research Implications and Future Research Recommendations

Despite the identified limitations, the present research remains significant by offering several important research implications. The practical implications of this linguistic plateau are relevant for the Academy of Language Studies at UiTM Shah Alam. Because informal English usage plateaus early, universities cannot assume that classroom-bound language instruction naturally creates social fluency. To maximize the real-world proficiency of language graduates, institutional administrators should establish low-stakes, extracurricular immersion ecosystems.

This includes introducing informal English-only spaces - such as student-led coffee lounges, conversational circles, or un-graded communication hackathons - where students can use the language socially without the anxiety of academic evaluation. Furthermore, the lower communication engagement observed among EIC track students suggests that their curriculum requires an increase in high-frequency, active speaking modules to balance their extensive theoretical training in cultural analysis.

To conclude, a few practical directions can be considered for researchers exploring to take this topic further by using mixed methods, broadening the student pool, and applying stronger theoretical grounding.

Firstly, future research of the same area of concern can consider using mixed methods. Future studies should move away from relying strictly on numbers. By pairing quantitative surveys with qualitative tools like semi-structured interviews or small focus group discussions, researchers can get a much truer, more detailed look at what students actually experience when interacting with peers.

Apart from that, future researchers can help extend the research by broadening the student pool. To get findings that actually represent Malaysian higher education as a whole, this study needs to be scaled up. It should be expanded to include multiple universities and a wider variety of student demographics, particularly those outside of language-focused majors.

Finally, it is also recommended that stronger theoretical grounding is explored for future research considerations. This is because future instruments should build a direct, visible bridge between theory and practice. The survey tools should be designed with an explicit matrix that ties every single question back to a specific theoretical construct, making the final data interpretation much more conceptually sound.

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