

# Gender and the Use of English Language Among Form 3 Secondary School Students in Malaysia

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## Abstract

The use of the English language has been known to differ among its users based on a myriad of factors. One of these factors is gender, a social construct that influences many facets of life, including language use. The aim of this study is to investigate gender differences in the use of the English language among Form 3 secondary school students in Malaysia by looking at Lakoff's theory of women's language. Using a quantitative approach, this study consisted of 30 Form 3 students consisting of 15 boys and 15 girls as the respondents. Data obtained were analysed using descriptive statistics. The findings show some similarities and differences in language use between male and female students. Some of the similarities in male and female language use include the usage of hedges, fillers, and interruptions in speech. The differences can be seen in the use of tag questions, swear words, empty adjectives, volume of voice, and the use of formal and informal languages between male and female students. The main implication of this study is to contribute to the knowledge of gender and language use in Malaysia and to highlight the existence of women's language in the educational sphere.

**Keywords:** Gender Differences, Women's Language, English Language Use, Language Features, Secondary School Students.

## Introduction

Gender, especially in recent years, has been a topic of discussion spanning across multiple fields, viewpoints and localities. It has been a focal point of numerous studies relating to education, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and many other academic or social spheres. The differences between each gender, the different social values imposed upon each gender, and the freedom in which each gender can practise their rights has been researched, debated and even questioned by numerous scholars and the public alike. Gender differences have a crucial impact on the way that men and women function and this includes the speech of men and women of all ages, be it children, teenagers or adults.

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge what is meant by 'gender' since it is the focal point of this mini-study. Gender is a social construct that encompasses psychological, social, as well as cultural distinctions between men and women (Chouchane, 2016). It should not be confused with sex, that is something innate and related to biology. When gender is concerned, there are clear and subtle differences in the way that men and women are

expected to behave or converse, and this has resulted in gender stereotypes (Haines et al., 2016). For instance, men are often regarded by society as dominant, strong and capable of being leaders both in the workplace and within their own families. Women, on the other hand, are placed in a subservient position by society. They are considered to be submissive, weak and dependable on a male figure. These societal views have impacted the respect and trust awarded to men and women and have also resulted in differences in the way that boys and girls are raised.

Multiple theories have been put forth by scholars to explain the way that men and women differ when it comes to their speech. One of the pioneer articles relating to women's speech is Lakoff's paper in 1973 where ten features of women's speech were outlined and discussed in detail. These ten features make up Lakoff's Theory of Women's Language, which will be the main theory in which this paper will be centred on. The ten features outlined by Lakoff (1973) in regards to women's speech are the use of lexical hedges or fillers, tag questions, declaratives, empty adjectives, intensifiers, super polite form, emphatic stress, specialised vocabulary, and an avoidance of swear words. Apart from that, other theories exist to outline the differences in men and women's speech, such as The Difference Theory pioneered by Tannen (1990); Howe (1997) and The Dominance Theory as explained by (O'Barr and Atkins, 2009).

Gender differences in language use may create an unequal linguistic space where women are required to be accommodating to men and to be less assertive in their choice of words while men are free to conquer a conversation and to be direct in their speech. In Malaysia, gender roles are still being upheld and this can be seen through the lack of women in the local political scene or in most leadership positions (Suleman et al., 2021). Malaysian women are still forced to adhere to outdated gender roles and this belief persists in every sphere, including the educational one. For most leadership positions in co-educational schools, male students are preferred as compared to girls and in English textbooks, gender stereotypes are still evident. Thus, it could be possible that the way in which Malaysian secondary school students speak might have different features as well, depending on their gender as outlined by (Lakoff, 1973).

However, it cannot be denied that Lakoff's study is dated and thus, the current speech of men and women may not exhibit any obvious differences. The studies conducted to test Lakoff's theory are numerous and most have reported an existence of women's speech but in the Malaysian context, specifically in Malaysian schools, there is a lack of research conducted to test whether or not the theory put forth by Lakoff applies to the general population here. Therefore, this study is conducted with the sole objective of investigating gender differences in the use of the English language among Form 3 secondary school students in Malaysia.

## **Literature Review**

### **Lakoff's Theory of Women's Language**

The study by Robin Lakoff (1973) presented a theory of women's language which is most likely a ground-breaking model used in many studies regarding the use of language among different genders. According to Lakoff, women have a more distinguished way of speaking than men, especially according to society's expectations. As mentioned by Bayu and Prayudha (2019), Lakoff's theory proved the differences between men's and women's languages where men's language is deemed to be more mature, direct, and assertive compared to women's language. Women are more likely to use polite language when expressing themselves or known as

'women's language' which displays the use of polite terms and speech in expressing their thoughts. There is a certain belief and expectation that society has towards women which implies that as women, they need to maintain their reputation as weaklings and powerless humans. In this theory, there are ten features of women's language that were discussed to show the differences between the speech of men and women.

The first feature is the use of lexical hedges or fillers in the sentence uttered. A hedge is a word used in the sentence to lessen the intensity of the statement and make it sound less severe (Ko, 2014). For instance, the use of words such as *sort of*, *I guess*, and *I think* in the sentence show that the speaker is trying to state that she is not sure of her claim and does not want to make the sentence sound too severe (Priska et al., 2020). The second feature according to Lakoff is tag questions. According to Priska et al (2020), a tag question is when the speaker uses an interrogative clause or tag after a declarative statement in the same sentence. For instance, the use of *isn't* in the sentence "John is here, isn't he?". It shows that the speaker wants the addressee to confirm their claim or wants the others to answer the question in a more elaborative way instead of a yes or no answer. However, according to Lakoff, the use of tag questions could also mean that the speaker is trying to start a conversation with the hearer.

Another feature in Lakoff's theory is the rising intonation in the declarative form of sentences to make the statement sound more polite and non-offensive to others. For example, in trying to deny things, the speaker tries to assure the hearers that they are telling the truth and want the confirmation of the claim such as "You didn't get scissors, eh?" by rising the intonation of *ehh* at the end of the sentence, it indicates that the speaker is telling the truth or seeking confirmation from the hearer (White, 2003). The fourth feature in the theory is empty adjectives. According to Lakoff (1973), certain terms are only used by women to express their feminine and lady-like traits. For example, the words *divine*, *adorable*, *lovely*, and *sweetie*. These words appear to be mostly used by women in their speaking compared to men who used stronger or neutral words such as *great*, *terrific*, or *cool*. The fifth feature of women's language is specialised vocabulary. This includes wider vocabularies in terms of words that express colours such as the colours magenta, and aquamarine.

The sixth feature mentioned by Lakoff is the use of intensifiers. As mentioned by Priska, Candra and Utami (2020), intensifiers are used to show the degree of the statement and whether the speaker wants to increase or decrease the intensity. For instance, the use of *so* has been used as a boosting device as it pertains to having a similar meaning to the word *very* in a sentence. As stated by Mazidah (2013), the use of an intensifier can also mean that the speaker wants the addressee to take her words seriously. The seventh feature of the theory is hypercorrect grammar. Priska, Candra and Utami (2020) stated, "Hypercorrect grammar is related to the politeness in utterance and indifference of the relationship between the speaker and addressee" (p.2). The eighth feature of language is the super polite form. It is used when speakers try to sound polite in giving a command to others. For example, when the word *will* is used in the beginning and the word *please* is used at the end of the sentence. The ninth feature of women's language according to Lakoff is the avoidance of strong swear words. As mentioned in her paper, the gender stereotype that society has towards women has disabled women to express their dissatisfaction through cursing.

The last feature of Lakoff's theory is emphatic stress. Annisa (2013) mentioned how women tend to use certain features in their written text when they want to emphasise or strengthen their claims. For example, they use italics, bolded words, colour terms, or give a higher word count in their writing.

### **The Dominance Approach**

Another model that also relates to gender and language is the Dominance Approach adopted by (Zimmerman and West, 1975). The dominance approach discussed the difference between men and women in communication which can be seen in everyday conversation or behaviour. This theory is based on how men tend to be more dominant in conversations based on the features found in the study. Zimmerman and West found out that men are more likely to interrupt than women. Thus, since men interrupt more in the conversation, the conversation appears to be dominated by men rather than women. This theory seems to support the theory of Lakoff (1973) on women's language whereby the writer mentioned how women are viewed as weak and powerless compared to men. In the Dominance approach, the author also highlights how men's language was more dominant than women's language. According to the study by Fishman (1983), it was found that men often have control over the conversation while women are more likely to ask questions to keep the conversation going and support the men's statement. Meanwhile, men were only answering and trying to reinforce their dominance over the conversations.

### **Gender Differences in Language Use**

Lakoff's study in 1973 concerning women's language has resulted in a plethora of studies conducted to investigate whether or not there exists a difference between the way that men and women use the English language. This section of the paper shall discuss these studies and their findings by focusing on five out of the ten features of women's language as outlined by Lakoff. In most of the studies conducted regarding gender differences in language use, the focus on the use of lexical hedges or fillers seems to be the most common. Rosanti and Jaelani (2016) carried out a descriptive qualitative study to analyse lexical hedges used by male and female students in spoken language. Their findings revealed that female students use more lexical hedges and fillers as compared to male students, with a total of 160 lexical hedges used by female students in a debate as opposed to 81 lexical hedges used by male students in the same debate.

The findings of Rosanti and Jaelani (2016) match those of similar studies such as (Amir et al., 2012; Chouchane, 2016; Namaziandost and Shafiee, 2018; Navratilova, 2015). Navratilova's descriptive study involving two male and two female students investigated the use of fillers between these students in two different 10-minute talks. It was found that the female students used more fillers in their speech, with a total of 171 fillers, as compared to the male students who used 159 number of fillers. Similarly, it was discovered in other studies that in conversations between men and women, the amount of lexical hedges and fillers used by women almost doubled men (Chouchane, 2016; Namaziandost & Shafiee, 2018). On a slightly different note, Amir et al (2012) investigated the difference in language use among male and female bloggers when writing diary entries. The language used is informal and is similar to spoken language. It was found that female bloggers used more than double the number of lexical hedges compared to male bloggers with 340 hedges and 141 hedges used, respectively.

Another feature of women's language is the use of tag questions and this has been studied by a few researchers as well (Amir et al., 2012; Chouchane, 2016; Leaper & Robnett, 2011; Shu'e & Yiting, 2019). The findings from these studies marginally contradict each other. While three of the studies proved that women tend to use tag questions more frequently than men in speech and informal writing, Chouchane (2016) discovered that out of the 5 tag questions that occur in a conversation, 3 were uttered by men. This shows that in certain

cases, men could also employ the use of women's language. Contradictory findings were also discovered when empty adjectives are concerned. Amir et al. (2012) reported that women used more empty adjectives compared to men with 239 used by women and only 92 used by men. Chouchane (2016) stated that some empty adjectives were used equally by the two genders while others were employed by women more than men. On the other hand, Karjo and Wijaya (2020) in their research related to male and female beauty influencers' speech, it was found that males used a higher number of adjectives as compared to females but the adjectives used by the male influencers were judgemental adjectives and not empty adjectives that were used by their female counterparts.

In terms of the use of the super polite form in women's language, aspects such as interruptions as well as direct and indirect language are considered as part of the feature. In regards to interruptions, findings from multiple studies seem to differ with some reporting that both men and women interrupt at almost the same frequency (Chouchane, 2016; Karakowsky et al., 2004), while others revealed that women interrupt more than men (Ariyanti et al., 2021; Zouch, 2016), and a few studies found that men interrupt at a higher frequency than women (Ghilzai, 2018; Mohajer & Endut, 2020). However, it is worth noting that men tend to interrupt women more than they interrupt other men (Chouchane, 2016; Ghilzai, 2018) and men are more successful at taking over the conversation following their interruption (Zouch, 2016). When it comes to direct and indirect language, research has shown that men are more direct in their speech as compared to women (Ebadi & Seidi, 2015; Kakolaki & Shahrokhi, 2016; Karjo & Wijaya, 2020; Mulac et al., 2001)

The final aspect to be discussed is the avoidance of swear words that is said to be a feature of women's speech in Lakoff's theory. Many studies have shown that men use swear words more than women do (Karjo & Wijaya, 2020; Love, 2021; Monk-Turner & Sylvertooth, 2008; Newman et al., 2008; Shu'e & Yiting, 2019). Furthermore, a study conducted by Knirnschild (2019) involving 400 respondents to a survey and 10 respondents to an interview have found that the usage of swear words by women is regarded as more offensive as compared to when a man uses the same words. These studies show that unlike the super polite feature discussed previously, avoidance of swear words remains as a feature of women's language even in current times.

Out of the five features of women's language discussed, it can be concluded that the use of hedges, fillers, and tag questions as well as an avoidance of swear words has been documented to be employed by women more than men. To the contrary, research regarding the use of empty adjectives and the super polite form in conversations between men and women have yielded different results that are inconclusive. Shu'e and Yiting (2019) have stated that "In the process of language communication, the difference in gender language is gradually fading". To support this, Love's study in 2021 that compared the use of swear words from the 1990s to the 2010s has found that although men still swear more than women, the difference of profanity usage between the two genders is starting to lessen. This could show that times are changing and gender differences in language use are no longer as pronounced as they used to be.

### **Gender in the Language Classroom**

Gender and the issues related to it permeates every aspect of life, including that of the language classroom. Pawelczyk et al (2014) claimed that the language classroom is a discursive space in which students are possibly molded into the gender roles that they have to play in relation to the society that they live in. It is also where students learn of the

practices, values, and rules of their society. Through this statement, it can be seen that the language classroom plays an important role, due to the fact that “no language is ever produced in a social vacuum” (Pawelczyk et al., 2014) and thus, language production will be influenced by the surrounding society of its speakers. Therefore, gender in relation to the language classroom has been studied extensively and its results have showcased how societal values concerning gender have affected English language learning in many different ways.

Duran (2006) conducted a case study to analyse boys and girls’ participation in an English language classroom and her findings indicated that boys participated more in classroom discussions and tended to interrupt girls, which led to the girls being more silent since there is a lack of support coming from the teacher. The same study shed light on the ways in which teachers could partake in discriminatory behaviour since the teacher in Duran’s study favoured the male students through the number of eye contacts, praise, and attention given to the boys over the girls. Similarly, Jule (2002) discovered that boys speak more than girls in an ESL classroom with a percentage of 88.3% and 11.7% respectively. Furthermore, the teacher often directed questions to male students and the general attention of the teacher was awarded to the boys. These findings were replicated in a research by Al-Shibel (2021) in which it was discovered that male students answered more questions than female students and when participating in pair assignments, male students talked more when paired with a person of the same gender. These findings highlight how girls tend to be sidelined in a language classroom and are not afforded the same opportunities as boys.

Concerning students’ perceptions of their English language teachers, a study conducted by Ara (2019) found that out of the ten female students interviewed, nine of them felt more comfortable with a female teacher. Meanwhile, the same interview conducted with ten male students discovered that five of them preferred having a male teacher, three of them preferred having a female teacher while two preferred both genders as teachers. The reasons given by the five boys in opting for a male teacher is because they deemed female teachers as less capable of teaching due to the way they hesitate in front of male students. An interview conducted by Ara (2019) with a female teacher has shed light on the fact that male students will often ignore instructions from female teachers. Since this study was conducted in Bangladesh, where gender inequality is rampant (Sweeting, 2020), it might explain the results obtained from the interview sessions.

However, that is not to say that female teachers are similar to male teachers. A study by Hussain et al (2022) confirmed how female teachers are different from their male counterparts since they use certain features of women’s language in the classroom such as hedges and super polite forms of communication that resulted in a few distinctions in the way that they conduct their lessons and interact with their students. Apart from teachers, there also exists a difference in the way that women and men are portrayed in English language textbooks used in classrooms. For instance, Yasin et al (2012) conducted a visual analysis of a Malaysian English school textbook and found that the textbook contains biased portrayals of the male and female gender. Most images contained more boys than girls, with the boys placed in a prominent position, usually shown to be participatory and leading the classroom. There are also depictions of girls serving the boys food and of women being in the kitchen washing dishes.

Likewise, Humardhiana and Hidayah (2020) discovered subtle sexism in an Indonesian English textbook that portrays sex-linked job opportunities with men being involved in diverse occupations while women were relegated to stereotypical ‘women’s jobs’ such as nurses, teachers or secretaries. Apart from that, women were shown to partake in stereotypical roles

and activities such as staying indoors and caring for their family. While there is certainly nothing wrong with women choosing to be housewives, depicting all women in such a way is harmful to the students as they might think that it is a norm for women to stay at home while only men go out to work. Multiple other studies have proven that elements of sexism are visible in the English textbooks used in various language classrooms (Norova, 2020; Rasool et al., 2020; Tyarakanita, 2021; Villanueva & Obaob, 2021).

Gender brings with it its own set of intricate issues within the language classroom and these issues must be addressed and mitigated by teachers, school administrators, and other major stakeholders. However, it is undeniable that the most authoritative position in a classroom is the teacher and thus, a share of the responsibility to lessen and ultimately, end, gender bias, should fall on them. Pawelczyk et al. (2014) stated that teachers should have appropriate skills in managing classroom discourse in order to prevent sexist ideas from being entertained or promoted. Humardhiana and Hidayah (2020) declared that teachers should pick suitable teaching materials that portray equality between genders while Duran (2006) claimed that it is crucial for language teachers to be aware of the way in which they treat their students and to ensure that no traces of gender discrimination is inadvertently committed by them. If all these measures are taken by English language teachers, it will hopefully produce language classrooms that are free from any gender bias or inequality.

### **Methodology**

This is a survey study that employed a set of questionnaire that consists of 27 items related to the features used in the speaking of the English language. The questionnaire was adapted from the study by Akhter (2014) on Differences in Language Use by Male and Female Students in Tertiary Academia in Dhaka City. The items were also based on some of the features from Lakoff's Theory such as lexical hedges, fillers, tag questions, empty adjectives, the use of swear words, and the use of super polite form which includes interruption, volume of voice, and also the use of direct or indirect language when speaking with the same or opposite gender and also their teachers. A total of 30 Form 3 secondary school students (15 male and 15 female students) participated in this study. Due to the fact that this research is related to English usage among secondary school students

### **Results**

The results of this study were organized based on features of language used. Table 1 to Table 4 show the participants' responses of each item.

Table 1

*Students' Use of Hedges and Fillers, Tag Questions, Swear Words, Empty Adjectives, and Interruptions According to Gender*

No.	Item	Gender	Not at all	Sometimes	Always
1.	Use of hedges with friend of the same gender	Male	2 (13.3%)	6 (40%)	7 (46.7%)
		Female	-	6 (40%)	9 (60%)
2.	Use of hedges with friend of opposite gender	Male	3 (20%)	5 (33.3%)	7 (46.7%)
		Female	1 (6.7%)	7 (46.7%)	7 (46.7%)
3.	Use of hedges with a teacher	Male	1 (6.7%)	4 (26.7%)	10 (66.7%)
		Female	1 (6.7%)	11 (73.3%)	3 (20%)
4.	Use of fillers with friend of the same gender	Male	1 (6.7%)	5 (33.3%)	9 (60%)
		Female	-	6 (40%)	9 (60%)
5.	Use of fillers with friend of opposite gender	Male	2 (13.3%)	7 (46.7%)	6 (40%)
		Female	-	8 (53.3%)	7 (46.7%)
6.	Use of fillers with a teacher	Male	4 (26.7%)	10 (66.7%)	1 (6.7%)
		Female	3 (20%)	8 (53.3%)	4 (26.7%)
7.	Use of tag questions with friend of the same gender	Male	3 (20%)	7 (46.7%)	5 (33.3%)
		Female	-	7 (46.7%)	8 (53.3%)
8.	Use of tag questions with friend of opposite gender	Male	5 (33.3%)	6 (40%)	4 (26.7%)
		Female	2 (13.3%)	8 (53.3%)	5 (33.3%)
9.	Use of tag questions with a teacher	Male	5 (33.3%)	10 (66.7%)	-
		Female	6 (40%)	9 (60%)	-
10.	Use of swear words with friend of the same gender	Male	2 (13.3%)	4 (26.7%)	9 (60%)
		Female	2 (13.3%)	7 (46.7%)	6 (40%)
11.	Use of swear words with friend of opposite gender	Male	4 (26.7%)	5 (33.3%)	6 (40%)
		Female	5 (33.3%)	4 (26.7%)	6 (40%)
12.	Use of swear words with a teacher	Male	10 (66.7%)	5 (33.3%)	-
		Female	15 (100%)	-	-

13.	Use of empty adjectives with friend of the same gender	Male	10 (66.7%)	3 (20%)	2 (13.3%)
		Female	-	2 (13.3%)	13 (86.7%)
14.	Use of empty adjectives with friend of opposite gender	Male	4 (26.7%)	7 (46.7%)	4 (26.7%)
		Female	3 (20%)	7 (46.7%)	5 (33.3%)
15.	Use of empty adjectives with a teacher	Male	6 (40%)	8 (53.3)	1 (6.7%)
		Female	1 (6.7%)	10 (66.7%)	4 (26.7%)
16.	Use of interruptions with friend of the same gender	Male	2 (13.3%)	9 (60%)	4 (26.7%)
		Female	5 (33.3%)	10 (66.7%)	-
17.	Use of interruptions with friend of opposite gender	Male	9 (60%)	5 (33.3%)	1 (6.7%)
		Female	9 (60%)	6 (40%)	-
18.	Use of interruptions with a teacher	Male	11 (73.3%)	4 (26.7%)	-
		Female	14 (93.3%)	1 (6.7%)	-

Table 2

*Students' Use of Formal and Informal Language According to Gender*

No.	Item	Gender	Formal language	Informal language
19.	When speaking with a friend of the same gender	Male	2 (13.3%)	13 (86.7%)
		Female	-	15 (100%)
20.	When speaking with a friend of the opposite gender	Male	2 (13.3%)	13 (86.7%)
		Female	1 (6.7%)	14 (93.3%)
21.	When speaking with a teacher	Male	10 (66.7%)	5 (33.3%)
		Female	11 (73.3%)	4 (26.7%)

Table 3

*Students' Use of Soft and Loud Volume of Voice According to Gender*

No.	Item	Gender	Soft volume	Loud volume
22.	When speaking with a friend of the same gender	Male	4 (26.7%)	11 (73.3%)
		Female	10 (66.7%)	5 (33.3%)
23.	When speaking with a friend of opposite gender	Male	10 (66.7%)	5 (33.3%)
		Female	9 (60%)	6 (40%)
24.	When speaking with a teacher	Male	13 (86.7%)	2 (13.3%)
		Female	15 (100%)	-

Table 4

*Students' Use of Direct and Indirect Language According to Gender*

No. of Question	Gender	Can you pass me that book, please?	Pass me that book, please.
25. When speaking with a friend of the same gender	Male	3 (20%)	12 (80%)
	Female	10 (66.7%)	5 (33.3%)
26. When speaking with a friend of opposite gender	Male	5 (33.3%)	10 (66.7%)
	Female	11 (73.3%)	4 (26.7%)
27. When speaking with a teacher	Male	13 (86.7%)	2 (13.3%)
	Female	15 (100%)	-

## Discussion

### Male Students' Language Use

In regards to male students' language use, it was found that they use certain features of women's language in their speech. The features most frequently used by male students according to the questionnaire are fillers and the super polite form. The findings indicate that both of these features were used by more than half of the male students. However, it can be seen that the usage often differs based on who the students are conversing with. For example, when conversing with their male friends, male students claimed to use fillers more often than when they were conversing with their female friends or their teacher. In contrast, male students' use of the super polite form is reserved mostly for when they are speaking with their teacher. These findings seem to contradict those from various scholars (Ebadi & Seidi, 2015; Kakolaki & Shahrokhi, 2016; Karjo & Wijaya, 2020; Mulac et al., 2001) who claimed that men tend to use direct speech. However, it does align with Chouchane (2016); Karakowsky et

al (2004) since it has been found that male and female students tend to interrupt at an almost similar frequency.

Meanwhile, some of the features of women's language used moderately by male students are hedges, tag questions, avoidance of swear words, and empty adjectives. Similar to the use of fillers, these usage of women's language features are dependent on who the students are speaking with. For instance, hedges, tag questions, and an avoidance of swear words are in use when they speak with their teacher and not so much when they are speaking with their friends of the same or opposite gender. The use of empty adjectives, on the other hand, is moderately used by male students while they are speaking with their teachers and female friends and are rarely used when they are speaking with their male friends. The findings regarding the use of tag questions matches Chouchane (2016) whereby it was found that men sometimes employ the use of tag questions as well. However, it can be said that men tend to use swear words more frequently as compared to women because even though the male students in this study seem to avoid swear words while speaking with their teacher, they use profanities frequently with their friends. As mentioned by Love (2021), swearing is highly related to contextual factors such as gender, and as such, the gender of the interlocutor will affect the use of profanity in a particular conversation.

It can be seen from the findings that male students' use of women's language is highly dependent on their conversational partner. In her paper, Lakoff (1973) relates women's language to the status of women in society that are deemed by most to be inferior as compared to men. Lakoff claimed that it is women's position in society that resulted in women's language being used by women in order to appear submissive, polite or respectful. Due to this, it can be concluded that a person's social status in relation to others will have an effect on their language use. Thus, male students in this study use women's language when they are conversing with their teacher because their status is lower than that of their teachers'. It is a norm in every society that a teacher should be respected by their students and spoken to with polite manners. On the contrary, male students tend to disregard the use of women's language when they are communicating with their friends because they are of the same social standing and thus, there is no requirement for them to be overly polite or respectful.

It is also interesting to note that certain features of women's language are used by male students when they are speaking with their male friends but the same features are not used when speaking with their female friends. For example, features such as hedges and fillers, as well as tag questions are used frequently by male students when conversing with their male friends but are not used as often when conversing with their female friends. A reason for this may be that since hedges and fillers are used to reduce the severity of a statement (Ko, 2014; Priska et al., 2020), male students tend to use it while speaking with their male friends in order to make their speech friendlier and less hostile. Tag questions, on the other hand, are sometimes used as conversation starters (Lakoff, 1973), and male students possibly use this with their male friends as a way to begin a particular discussion. In this sense, the use of women's language can also be said to be a way to appear friendlier and more accommodating.

One possible reason as to why male students rarely use hedges, fillers and tag questions with their female friends is because they are less likely to be friendly or accommodating to them. Malaysia is a Muslim-majority country and as such, students who are Muslims might be less friendlier to those of the opposite sex and are less likely to be close friends with them too. Another reason could be that male students want to appear confident and sure of their

speech when talking with their female friends and due to this, they do not make use of fillers and hedges that can make them sound uncertain.

On a slightly different note, there are features of women's language that male students use frequently with their female friends but rarely use with their male friends. These features are empty adjectives, super polite form, and an avoidance of swear words. This is in contrast to certain studies (Amir et al., 2012; Karjo & Wijaya, 2020) that discovered men's infrequent use of empty adjectives. Similarly, these findings contradict greatly with Chouchane (2016); Ghilzai (2018) who claimed that men interrupt women more than they interrupt other men. It also contradicts various research (Ebadi & Seidi, 2015; Kakolaki & Shahrokhi, 2016; Karjo & Wijaya, 2020; Mulac et al., 2001) that show men are more direct when speaking. However, a reason for this contradiction could be due to the fact that this mini-study involves the use of a self-assessment questionnaire where the students answer the questions based on their own perceptions of how they view their language use. Thus, it is possible that they view their way of speaking in a way that is not entirely accurate to how they truly speak. This is unfortunately a limitation of this mini-study but nevertheless, there is another possibility that the male students use these features of women's language around their female friends due to chivalry or a desire to be polite and accommodating to women.

### **Female Students' Language Use**

According to Lakoff (1973), the use of hedges is more predominant among women than men. The findings of this research also revealed that female students are more likely to use hedges in their speech as compared to men. As mentioned by some of the past studies such as Chouchane (2016); Rosanti and Jaelani (2016), their findings indicated that the number of hedges used by women is more than men. Thus, the findings of this study do support the theory of Lakoff (1973), and the findings of the past studies mentioned since the results show that a greater number of female students agreed that they always use hedges in their speech compared to the number of male students. In terms of usage, female students use more hedges when they speak with a female friend compared to when they are speaking with a friend of the opposite gender or a teacher. This might happen because of the feeling of insecurity or the lack of confidence between female students when they are speaking with each other as the result of this study revealed that the female students used more hedges only when they were conversing with their female friends.

Regarding the feature of fillers in the language, the findings show the usage of fillers among female students is almost at the same level as men. It is stated in the studies of Navratilova (2015); Rosanti and Jaelani (2016) that the use of fillers is predominant in women's language compared to the men's language. Therefore, this study shows a contrary finding to the studies done by Navratilova (2015); Rosanti and Jaelani (2016) about the difference in the usage of fillers among men and women. It might happen because both men and women tend to use fillers when they are speaking and it is not depending on the gender itself. As known, the use of fillers is meaningless and is merely used to give time for the speaker to think before answering questions.

One of the major differences between male and female languages can be found in the use of tag questions. In this study, it indicates that female students used more tag questions when speaking with a friend of the same gender as the majority of the girls answered *always* to the questions compared to the male students since most of the boys said that they *sometimes* used tag questions when speaking with their friends of the same gender. According to Leaper and Robert (2011); Amie et al (2012); Shu'e and Yiting (2019), their

findings showed that women are more dominant in the use of tag questions compared to men. In addition, Lakoff (1973) ascertained that women used more tag questions when speaking with people. Therefore, this finding supports the findings of these past studies on how the use of tag questions are more dominant among women than men. In terms of the usage of tag questions when speaking with a friend of the opposite gender and a teacher, these female students sometimes used them in their speech. From this research, the female students tend to use tag questions in their speech as they would prefer to have people, especially their friend of the same gender, agree or disagree to their statement rather than just giving a statement solely from their opinion.

Concerning the use of swear words between men and women, Lakoff (1973) found that women tend to avoid using swear words in their speech compared to men. Besides, according to some of the past studies including Shu'e and Yiting (2019); Kario and Wijaya (2020), their findings showed that men used more swear words than women. In this research, the findings also indicate the same results as it shows that the majority of the male students answered that they always used swear words when speaking with their friends while for female students, they do use them, but not frequently especially when speaking with their friend of the same gender. However, when they are conversing with a friend of the opposite gender, they always use swear words in their speech. When conversing with a teacher, both male and female students do not use swear words at all. Female students are more careful when it comes to using swear words in their language as women are more concerned about their feelings and prefer to maintain the harmonies in their conversations compared to men. However, in terms of speaking with the teacher, all students either male or female, have to know their limitations in speaking since the teacher is someone who they should look up to and not someone who they can treat as their normal friend.

Research has also looked at the use of empty adjectives among male and female students. In this research, the findings found that the use of empty adjectives is more dominant among female students compared to male students. This finding supports the statement by Lakoff (1973) in her theory of women's language where the adjectives such as *adorable*, *lovely*, *sweet*, and *charming* are commonly used by women in their speech. In addition, in the study by Amir et al (2012), the findings also showed the same result where the use of empty adjectives is more dominant in women than men. In this study, the data shows that the majority of the female students agreed that they always use empty adjectives when conversing with their friends of the same gender. However, according to the male students, they do not use empty adjectives at all, especially when conversing with a friend of the same gender. This finding shows a major difference between male and female students' languages. However, when discussing the use of empty adjectives by female students specifically, the findings show that the majority of female students use empty adjectives more when conversing with a friend of the same gender compared to when they speak with a friend of the opposite gender or a teacher. The use of empty adjectives in speech can actually show an attempt of showing a friendly element in the speech although it does not really affect the meaning of the sentence spoken even if it is not used. In the case of female students, they prefer to have friendly conversations when they are speaking among themselves as it might create a positive environment in their conversation.

In the aspect of interruptions, this study failed to find significant differences between men's and women's languages. The findings show that men and women interrupt at the same level of frequency, or it can be said that nothing significantly different was found. Thus, it indicates that this finding does not support the study by Zimmerman and West (1975) that

men tend to interrupt more in the conversation with a woman and they seem to be more dominant in that conversation. However, there are still some studies that have similar results to the findings of this study, and among them are Chouchane (2016); Karakowsky et al (2004) that found the frequency of interruption of either men or women is the same. In women's language specifically, the study found that the majority of female students do not interrupt at all when conversing with a friend of the opposite gender or with a teacher. Thus, in this case, both male and female students seem to prefer listening to their friends' speaking before they want to voice out their opinion on that matter. However, for female students, it might be because of the environment in which they are being brought up that has caused them to be more attentive and avoid interrupting people especially when speaking with the opposite gender or a teacher.

Regarding the use of formal and informal language, the study found similarities in answers between male and female students. Both genders revealed that they used informal language when they are conversing with a friend of the same gender and opposite gender. This can be supported by Amir et al (2012) on the use of informal languages by both genders in writing diary entries. It revealed that men and women tend to use the same languages either in the form of speaking or writing. However, in conversation with a teacher, they tend to use formal language more. Hence, it can be highlighted that the study shows the extensive use of formal language among the students when they are conversing with a teacher. People commonly use informal language when speaking with friends or family members because it is more casual and spontaneous, however, when conversing with a teacher, there should be a clear formality between students and teachers as students should show some respect to the teacher and one of the ways is by using formal language.

In terms of voice volume usage, this study indicates that female students always prefer to use a soft volume of voice in their speech either when they are conversing with their friends or with teachers. However, in the case of male students, they only use soft volume of voice when they are conversing with a friend of the opposite gender. Women are known to be less dominant in a conversation as stated by (Zimmerman and West, 1975). Thus, in this case, the use of soft volume of voice might be the best approach for female students to avoid themselves from getting the attention of people or from dominating the conversation generally.

The last aspect of language that has been analysed is the use of direct and indirect language. In this study, it was found that the majority of female students like to use indirect language when speaking with friends and teachers. Male students only use indirect language when conversing with a teacher. This can be supported by the findings of Lakoff (1973) on how women prefer to use a polite command instead of seeking obedience in their speech compared to men who prefer to be direct when asking for something. According to Lakoff, women are urged to show their femininity even in their speech by using a feature of women's language such as super polite forms. This can be supported by Hussain et al (2022) who found that female teachers tend to use super polite forms which are commonly known as one of the features in women's language according to Lakoff (1973) as compared to male teachers. Thus, this study shows that in terms of the usage of super polite forms in speech, it is more dominant in women's language as compared to men's language. With these findings, it shows that female students tend to behave and communicate politely with people compared to male students.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, there are similarities and differences between male and female students in using language. The similarities that can be highlighted are the usage of hedges, fillers, and interruptions when speaking with people as the findings indicate that both boys and girls commonly use these aspects in their conversation. However, other aspects such as the use of tag questions, swear words, empty adjectives, volume of voice, and the use of formal and informal languages shows clear differences between both male and female students. Thus, it can be clearly said that men and women do use language differently as there are significant distinctions in their language usage based on this study. There are some potential limitations of this study. Among them is this research was conducted using a small-scale sample which was 30 Form 3 students from a large population of students in Malaysia. The second limitation concerns the use of students as the sample for the study which might not reflect the use of languages for each gender as these students might still lack the knowledge and skills in using the English language. This research sheds light on the different ways in which male and female students use the English language and in turn, allow some insight into how gender influences their speech. Language educators should be made aware of these differences so they can avoid stereotyping and discrimination in their lessons. It is hoped that this research will enable English teachers to be more aware of gender differences in language use and to work towards an inclusive language classroom. The study on gender differences in ESL context put forth several implications for the stakeholders in education field, most importantly educators, as they play a crucial role in promoting a positive classroom environment. This research was also conducted to contribute to the knowledge of gender and language use in Malaysia. Therefore, it is hoped that this study brings more interest to future researchers in the study of gender differences in language use pertaining to the Malaysian community.

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