

A Genderlect View of Communication Patterns of Male and Female Students in a Higher Education Institution

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to describe the communication patterns relevant to the teaching-learning process among students in higher education following the Genderlect Styles Theory by Deborah Tannen, who emphasized that there are gender differences in the ways males and females communicate. A descriptive research design was followed utilizing a questionnaire checklist distributed to 100 university students. It revealed that both male and female university students observe varied communication patterns inside the classroom with respect to “public and private speaking,” “telling a story,” “listening,” “asking questions,” and “resolving conflicts.” Despite the similarities, specific differences in the communication styles of the university students vary, as revealed by the rejection of the null hypothesis. Thus, the following communication patterns were observed: female students seek connection, male students seek status; female students use rapport talk, male students use report talk; and both sexes may speak the same language, but they mean different things. These results implied that it is relevant among educators in higher education to be conscious of their students' various communication styles as observed from their communication patterns.

Keywords: *genderlect, communication patterns, male and female students, communication*

INTRODUCTION

Males and females grew up being surrounded by the same sex, in which, they shared the same interests and activities. As such, when males and females communicate, it is observed that whenever they are communicating with the opposite sex, they can arrive at a different level of understanding or interpretation about certain actions.

This observation in the context of how males and females interact was anchored on Deborah Tannen's (1990, as cited in Griffin et al., 2023)

“Gender Theory,” which explains that the differences in how “men and women communicate are cross-cultural.” This theory further explores that growing up differently leads men and women to have different perspectives; however, both sexes are unaware that their communicative experiences are caused by their cross-cultural differences. Others also see this communication as a consequence of the inferiority or dominance of the two competing sexes (Griffin et al., 2023).

Several studies have been conducted to see the differences between the sexes in various settings. In their work on a conversational analysis of classroom-based talk show production, Galano et al. (2021) specified the probable differences among students, such as women asking more questions than men, women using more fillers than men; both men and women using intensifiers for emphasis, women using more rebuttals compared to affirmatives than men, women using more adjectives than men. Similarly, this dominance in communication is also observed in the study of Ahmad (2024) where males play a prominent role as compared to females who significantly express less humour than their male counterparts. This is similar to the study of Cooper et al. (2018) which determined that female students are less tolerant of jokes about stereotypes of men or women, and sexual humor is enjoyed by male students. Gender differences can also be observed in terms of apologizing and politeness as revealed in the study by Lawong (2023) which indicates that the female gender apologises more than the male.

These findings can also be associated in a classroom setting as Kilby (2023) demonstrated in his study wherein masculine dominance in communication is present in children’s communication, and explanations for this occurrence fall on traditional gender stereotypes that still linger, to greater and lesser degrees, in all parts of our society, including education. Meanwhile, Kara (2020) supported these results in her study of the use of language between males and females, it was revealed that there were significant differences in speech among the 16 male and female university students she studied. This is in contrast to the 2019 study by Ray and Pani that the dominance of particular communication styles and genderlect associated with a specific gender is no more as profound as it was earlier except for a few.

In such contexts, schools are essential contexts for socialization among students, and students often spend significant quantities of time involved with their peers, specifically in school. As such, the empirical studies examined illustrated the disparities between male and female students in a classroom environment.

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Tannen (1990) argued that two distinct cultural dialects are better seen as masculine and feminine forms of discourse. With this distinction, she reiterated that there are gender gaps in how people connect. These differences among men and women when they interact are seen only from a theoretical view, and there are instances when these differences are observed among the two sexes even at higher education institutions. This gender gap should be explored in higher education settings as there are few empirical findings on the dynamics of classroom settings that deal with this scope.

For this reason, this study's main objective is to explore the similarities and differences between male and female communication styles to describe the communication patterns of the two sexes in different communication contexts, such as "report talk and rapport talk," "storytelling," "listening," and "asking questions" from the lens of Deborah Tannen's Genderlect Styles. To empirically attain this purpose, the study tested the null hypothesis that states, "There is no significant difference in the communication patterns of male and female students in a higher education institution".

METHODOLOGY

This research aims to identify the communication patterns of male and female students in a higher education institution, in a state university in the Philippines utilizing a quantitative research design. The respondents of this study were 100 university students (50 males and 50 females). The researcher developed a 21-item questionnaire with five (5) variables based on Deborah Tannen's Genderlect Styles Theory. Each question has a 4-point scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" Likert object. Cronbach's alpha was used on 30 samples (15 males and 15 females) to assess the questionnaire's internal reliability. Those who evaluated the instrument were not part of the 100 respondents. Based on the evaluation of the questionnaire checklist, the reliability test gained 0.805, suggesting a "good degree" of internal consistency.

In the construct of ideating this paper, the research would like to emphasize that the term "sex" refers to a set of biological attributes in humans (Canadian Institute of Health Research [CIHR], 2023). It is primarily associated with physical and physiological features including chromosomes, gene expression, hormone levels and function, and reproductive/sexual anatomy (CIHR, 2023). Hence, the terms "male" and "female" were used entirely in the discussion of the results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data indicate that both male and female respondents perceived identical forms of communication in all contact contexts analyzed. Despite similarities, these types of communication vary from various levels, contributing to variations in how they communicate in different communicative situations.

The following discussions shall present the communication patterns that are empirically obtained from the interpretation of the data obtained among the respondents with respect to “report talk and rapport talk,” “telling stories,” “listening,” “asking questions,” and “resolving conflicts”:

Table 1
Communication Patterns of Male and Female Students in a Higher Education

Communication Patterns	Female		Male	
	Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
A. Report Talk and Rapport Talk	3.20	Agree	3.28	Agree
B. Telling Story	2.93	Agree	3.12	Agree
C. Listening	3.31	Agree	3.2	Agree
D. Asking Questions	3.0	Agree	3.2	Agree
E. Resolving Conflicts	3.06	Agree	3.3	Strongly Agree

In both “report talk and rapport talk,” the obtained data indicate that both sexes talk a lot. Certain patterns in their communications revealed that the variations in the means acquired imply that females speak a lot in public spaces. Male students, on the other hand, are more likely to reveal information than female students. This suggests that male students keep their issues to themselves and do not see the point in personally discussing problems. In the context of classroom interaction, this can be implicated on the same research findings of Dutta and Arnold (2022) that when a female participates in class, it increases the likelihood other females will participate.

In contrast to female students, some male students use lecture forms more frequently— an indication of “report talk.” Male students use report talk when giving commands and transmitting the information. On the other hand, female students prefer rapport talk. According to Tannen (1990), report talk refers to providing direct information while rapport talk signifies females in general seek connection with the person they are conversing with. Paola (2020) supported this results that females are significantly less likely to give public presentations unlike males who are more willing to present face-to-face.

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This implies that the emphasis on male students is more on talking and providing results. More so, male students are more likely than their opposite sex to insist on the agreement. Male students assume they can only move on to another issue if they can also disagree with certain things they deal with. This means that they are more direct in how they communicate with others. Being straightforward in their statements tends to establish being firm in their decision.

Male students are often stereotyped as being rational-minded when it comes to disposition. They use their minds when weighing things. This is unlike female students who are aware that their relationship with others may be affected should they directly disagree with something they are stating.

Females are more particular in using their emotions when making decisions, which is often regarded as a stereotype among them. This stereotype among male and female students has become the basis for discrediting one sex to another, which should not always be the case. As affirmed in the recent findings of this current paper, female students go indirectly with their statement so they will not lose their sense of “connecting” to the person they are conversing with. More so, the two sexes are still interested in discussions with others. This suggests that not only do both sexes regulate the content of conversations, but they also work harder to either keep conversations going or put an end to it.

“Telling a story” is an act of sharing stories with other individuals. As the communication pattern revealed from the obtained data, male students share more stories and jokes than the opposite sex. Stories are revealed more by female students than by their male counterparts. The result also delves into how female students perceive their storytelling behavior in comparison to male students. Female students deny downplaying their opposite sex while sharing stories, indicating that they do not see their storytelling as diminishing the other sex. This denial could be rooted in a desire to assert their autonomy and agency in storytelling without necessarily wanting to undermine the opposite sex.

Another interesting point raised is the representation of the sexes within the stories themselves. It suggests that female students tend to reveal more stories where they are portrayed as protagonists, while male students may share stories as a way of asserting dominance or one-upmanship. This observation could reflect broader societal narratives and power dynamics regarding gender roles and representation.

It suggests that male students may share experiences as a means of asserting superiority or establishing dominance, while female students may use

storytelling to portray themselves in empowering roles. However, it is important to note that these interpretations are based on observed patterns and may not apply universally to all individuals within these gender categories.

When it comes to “listening,” it is more likely that male students interrupt female students more than other male students, as shown from their obtained means. This communication pattern implies that interruptions are male students’ style of showing approval, offering help, or offering what they expect the speaker would say; this suggests that this is male students’ action to show a movement of force, which is unlike female students who listen to every single word they say. As indicated by their affirmation in the survey, female students pay more attention to non-verbal signs as they listen.

There is a scientific explanation for why females are considered more observant than males in the context of listening. Females generally show a better orientation toward faces and emotional expressions, which enhances their observational skills in social contexts (Robertson, 2024). They are often better at interpreting emotions and non-verbal cues, which is linked to their neurological predispositions (Salavera & Usán, 2021).

There are also differences in the way male and female university students “ask questions,” as seen in the difference in their obtained means. As for this implication on their communication patterns, both sexes often claimed that whenever they asked for assistance in performing a task, they interpreted this as they looked ignorant. The discrepancy of the obtained mean from the survey shows that this was thought of by more male students than female students. From the perspective of male students, they could have interpreted asking questions as a representation of their inability to succeed on one’s merit. This is unlikely defined differently by female students, who think that when someone asks questions, they translate them as a way of showing concern. More so, female students interpreted that asking questions was their opportunity to establish relationships or create links with other people. This demonstrates that male students want to prove that they can do stuff that will emphasize their superior behavior, unlike female students who are more likely concerned about establishing a connection.

Wrigley-Asante (2023) linked this context to broader socio-economic influences, which include economic hardship, financial constraints, and gendered ideologies that tend to affect male students. Musso (2022) also observed school empowerment among male students in the institution he studied and associated those in the context of many sociocultural, contextual, biological, behavioral, and

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psychological variables contributing to the widespread under-representation of girls and women.

Since they are highly vigilant with their choices, male students are more comfortable with “resolving conflicts,” as seen in the results of the study. As their communication pattern implies, more female students think that conflict should not be tolerated in a conversation. Despite this, there are more male students who, compared to female students, are more concerned about the implications of the conflict. This means that male students switch right away to solutions and problem-solving. Relationship-oriented female students search for commonalities and ways to communicate while addressing disputes with others. They also engage with more psychological transparency and drama than their male counterparts.

The study argues that female students’ emotional vulnerability would make them less prepared when resolving a dispute than men. This is further explained by Guerin (2021) who mentioned that women often navigate a complicated relationship with vulnerability, balancing their inherent strengths with societal pressures. She further explained that while vulnerability can lead to deeper intimacy and trust in relationships, it also exposes women to potential emotional risks. Research indicates that females process anger differently than males, which can influence how they manage conflict and emotional responses (Amen Clinic, 2022). Despite this, Drgoňová (2023) acknowledged that the involvement of females in conflict prevention, management, and resolution, whether in mediating and negotiating roles or through grassroots efforts (related to minor disputes arising in the daily life of communities), is essential for attaining lasting agreements. It is because of the natural nurturing behavior of females in times of conflict resolution.

This study tested the null hypothesis to determine empirically if there is a significant difference in male and female university students’ communication styles.

Table 2

Significant Difference in the Communication Pattern of Male and Female Students in a Higher Education Institution

	t-value	Ho	Decision
Communication Patterns	0.050	Rejected	Significant

The results indicate that with respect to “rapport talks and private talk”, “telling a story”, “listening”, “asking questions”, and “resolving conflicts”, there is a significant difference between male and female respondents’ communication patterns, as its p-value of 0.05 is sufficient to reject the null hypothesis. This

suggests that the way male and female university students communicate differs significantly because of the variations in their communication styles.

This further implies that male and female university students' communication patterns are segregated. It further reveals that the differences determined that young males used conversational styles to demonstrate rank, freedom, advice, knowledge, orders, and conflicts. On the other hand, young females used casual styles for encouragement, affection, comprehension, emotions, suggestions, and agreement. These findings conform to the reviewed studies of Ahmad (2024), Galano et al. (2021), Kara (2020), and Kilby (2023), which indicate that male and female students in school settings have different communication styles.

This disparity in communication styles between female and male students in a university may have been caused by an influential impact on all forms of human communication, which can be linked to the social distinctions between males and females. This is apparent in how Tannen (1990) defined the disparity in communication patterns in terms of how males and females differ when they are interacting with one another. Tannen (1990) said females sometimes restrain themselves from being considered superior to others and are afraid of being criticized as "bossy." It was further clarified by Tannen (1990) that males are entirely different. Other males consider this dominance as an act of becoming a leader while other males would see it as being superior in a group.

Implications to Gender-Fair Higher Education

The study calls for educators to be conscious of their students' various communication styles as observed from their communication patterns regardless of gender differences. Attention should be given to fostering gender-fair education by adopting the following implications for gender-fair teaching in a higher education institution.

Gender-fair teaching challenges educators to treat all students equally, and to recognize and accommodate different learning styles. As such, with respect to "report talk vs. rapport talk," male students talk more often in public conversation, convey more information in a lecture style, and are more into insisting agreement compared to female students. Participation is essential to learning, and students who are actively involved learn more and are more satisfied with their education. There is a need to encourage the learners to participate in class, especially the female students. Some students are not comfortable speaking in front of the

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class. To give them the opportunity to share their ideas, forming a small group with a mixture of males and females will allow them the chance to speak.

Teachers should be wary of jokes and should be sensitive if these jokes could offend others, especially since, as revealed in the study, males tell more jokes. Based on this context when the class is “telling stories,” teachers should not condone “jokes” about women’s issues, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. If other students use inappropriate gendered behavior, it should not be ignored. Teachers should pay attention to this should the class express sexist, embarrassing, or trivializing words and humor about them. As a teacher, ignoring these jokes sends the message that they agree with such behavior or attitudes.

It is recommended that teachers should encourage their students to use gender-fair language in class. In English, most male pronouns are used when referring to a group. As a result, this can make female students feel that they are being left out. Teachers should use gender-neutral pronouns whenever possible. One example is, instead of saying “guys” when referring to a class or group say “everybody” or “everyone.”

In the context of “listening,” females reveal that while listening, they show more attentiveness to verbal and nonverbal cues compared to male students. It can also imply that men focus on the facts while women focus on “the mood of the communication.” Teachers should understand that while the students are listening, they also pay attention to the body language of the person they are listening to, which can reveal information about the speaker and his or her message. Hence, teachers should be careful not only with the words they utter but also with how they present themselves to the students because it affects the way learners acquire knowledge.

In relation to “asking questions,” more female students ask more questions to establish a connection while more males state opinions to situate superiority. There is a need to establish a class that promotes open communication to both genders to encourage most of them to partake in the discussion. If the class feels that there are gender biases in class, there is a possibility that they will not opt to ask questions before the class for fear of being rejected. During the inquiries of the students in the class, teachers need to call on or talk to both female and male students in a balanced way. There are some instances where both male and female teachers often call on male students to speak in class more often than female students.

More females said that conflict should be avoided because it disconnects people when “resolving conflicts.” It is relevant that teachers should advocate gender balance in the class by instilling in the minds of the students, regardless of their gender, the ability to recognize, appreciate, and value the differences between males and females. Doing so would make the students understand how males and females tend to relate to conflict and have a clear understanding of what each other’s sex needs to know how to better resolve their differences. Inside the class, the teachers should be aware when male students insult female students, or female students insult male students. Here, imposing discipline among students is very important. If the insults appear gender-based, the teacher should be quick to intervene and discipline the students making insults. This action would mean to the students that either gender once conflict arises, will be supported.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the research results, Tannen’s Genderlect Styles Theory is observed; however, depending on some circumstances, the similarities and differences in the communication patterns of male and female students vary as revealed by the succeeding communication patterns.

Firstly, **female students seek connection while male students seek status.** For males, rank and dominance are essential while connecting, but for females, it is an opportunity to search for commonalities and ways to establishing connection with other individuals. Secondly, **female students use rapport talk while male university students use report talk.** Female students appear to be emotional, and their personal feelings can motivate them because they are more likely to appeal for sympathy and empathy as they connect with others. Male learners are interested in imposing their superiority through telling jokes in their stories that will make them dominant in the conversation. Thirdly, **male and female students speak the same language, but they mean different things.** Male students’ language indicates that they are more likely to connect to preserve their status and freedom. At the same time, female students prefer to see contact as a way to develop friendships and relationships.

Despite these contradictions in Tannen’s view on gender communication, it was stressed that the sense of what is conveyed is important because the context of gender differences varies from one person to the next. However, as presented in this current study, the Genderlect view of male and female students in a higher education institution has been comprehensively apparent. Therefore,

in the students' teaching-learning process, deciding whether the genders are more alike or different is essential to a higher education institution.

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