



Analyzing Students' Essays on the Use of Gender-Sensitive Language

Blaise Ken Jay Bugahod¹, Kenny Rey O. Belano, Rovy M. Banguis¹

¹English Department, College of Arts and Sciences, MSU Buug Campus, Buug, Zamboanga Sibugay, Philippines
Email: rovy.banguis@msubuug.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to determine the use of gender-sensitive language in the persuasive essays among the senior BAELS students. It further aimed to determine how those languages are used in the sentence or phrase; and if the essays serve as representation of students' awareness on gender-equality. The data were gathered from the twenty-one (21) persuasive essays of fourth year BAELS students in Mindanao State University- Buug Campus. With the use of a descriptive qualitative research and with the aid of the framework, the study arrived with the following findings. The study showed that majority or the most frequently used gender-sensitive language is students/learners and least frequently use are: police officer, business person, sales associate, fire fighter, flight attendant; and school staff. The use of gender-sensitive languages in the sentence or phrase as extracted from the essays of the respondents are gender-neutral nouns, gender -neutral pronouns; and job titles. The study found out that the said students were aware of gender-sensitive languages based on their frequency of usage of such languages. Based on the findings, the researchers concluded that fourth year BAELS students are using gender-sensitive languages in writing essays; this can be seen through their usage of gender-neutral nouns, gender-neutral pronouns and job titles; and they are aware of gender equality because students are seeking for neutrality and equality in all aspect. Hence, it is recommended that future researchers may conduct comparative studies considering other participants who don't have language and gender subject and further investigate teachers and students' awareness on gender sensitive language

Keywords: gender-sensitive language, persuasive essays, gender-neutral pronouns

1 INTRODUCTION

One of the components of demonstrating our cultural sensitivity Several linguistic theories have made numerous recommendations for minimizing gender biases in the English language, including and finally, a defined language policy that combats gender discrimination in the English language is in place. Yet not all English speakers are familiar with or want to use the term gender-sensitive language. The idea of gender-sensitive language usage should also be communicated to all English speakers worldwide because English is the lingua franca of the twenty-first century.

Gender-sensitive language also refers to the analysis of the language and the choice of impartial and neutral forms. If the subject is a specific individual and the information provided in the paper is not meant to be generalized, certain gender-specific vocabulary may be utilized. That would not raise the issue of language equality with readers. Four gender types in a language are highlighted in recent linguistic studies about gender and language. Lexical gender is defined as words with gender-specific meanings, such

as mother and father, actor and actress, which may in turn relate the extra linguistic category of referential gender. Preventing gender discrimination begins with language, as the consistent use of gender-biased terminology affects attitudes and expectations and may cause readers to cast women in a negative light or prolong the survival of a stereotypical vision of masculine and feminine roles in their minds. "Words matter, and our language choices have consequences. If we believe that women and men deserve social equality, then we should think seriously about how to reflect that belief in our language use" (Marlowe, 2001) . It is on this context that the researchers explored the awareness of BAELS students on the use of Gender-sensitive language since they have Language and Gender class. Gender is what links language expression to non-linguistic reality (Hellinger & Bussmann, 2001). To be more explicit, some terms with a gender dependent or specific meaning are generic and apply to both male and female agents (Hellinger & Bussmann, 2001) that has received attention in the last twenty

years is using language that is gender sensitive. In order to avoid any kind of societal bias or discrimination, it refers to the use of both male and female forms whenever it is practical. According to modern feminist views, language reformers who were feminists in the 1970's were the ones who first proposed the concept of gender-sensitive language. Since then, it is deemed sexist to refer to people of an undetermined gender simply as man or to use masculine pronouns (Marlowe, 2001). Moreover, it is sexist language when certain terms promote unfair or incorrect views about a certain sex, typically women (Cambridge, 1995). Men, however, can also be the target in specific situations (for example: manhunt, manslaughter and manhandle which have no feminine equivalents). In other words, if we don't want to use sexist language, we shouldn't use language that excludes people based on their gender.

Feminism and sociology have theories about how gender perception and expression in the context of one-on-one and group social interaction are influenced by cultural origins, mechanisms, and corollaries. In particular, gender roles are defined by the social construction of gender as an attained status in a social setting, which both implicitly and openly classifies individuals and subsequently drives social behavior.

Reformist Theory. According to this view, sexist language that is deemed irrational and capable of causing bias when the reality is portrayed is attacked by reformist feminists. Also, they advocated for neutralizing sexist terms such chairperson in place of chairman, Ms. in place of Missus or Miss, men and women in place of men, humanity in place of mankind, and he or she in place of he.

Even though this theory has received a lot of support, some critics have pointed out that there is no way to control what individuals say or mean, hence prejudice cannot be modified. Investigations in pragmatics concentrate on the use of language in speech or writing as well as explicit or implicit assumptions about the dynamics of linguistic interaction and the role of language as a means of communication. Pragmatics is described as the study of meaning in relation to the situation in which a person is speaking or writing in its definition. This covers the social, environmental, and linguistic context. The context also includes background information, or what people know about one another and the outside world.

Similar terms cause comparable cognitive inferences, which in turn have a consistent impact on non-linguistic behavior (Menegatti and Rubini, 2013). The perception of abstract statements as opposed to concrete ones is that they indicate more temporal stability, reveal more about the speaker and less about the circumstance, and are more likely to elicit expectations of repeat in the future. Numerous studies have demonstrated that intergroup bias, or the propensity to abstractly describe in group socially desirable behaviors and out group undesirable behaviors above in group undesirable and out group desirable behaviors, is a key mechanism by which social stereotypes and prejudice are implicitly transmitted (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, and Semin, 1989; Rubini et al., 2014; Wigboldus and Douglas, 2007).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study used descriptive qualitative design, in the sense that the researchers identified and tallied the frequency of use of the gender-sensitive language in the persuasive essays of BAELS students. It was utilized to bring out the study's focus on gender-sensitive languages.

2.2 Data Corpus

A total of twenty- one persuasive essays of the fourth year BAELS students served as the corpora of the present study.

2.3 Research Ethics

The researchers ensured that before the collection of data, a permission letter was sent to the VCRE thru the CAS Dean and Letter of Assent to the respondents. The researchers kept the identity of those students who wrote the persuasive essays, and the results were kept with confidentiality too. Results of the study were not disposed anywhere else, but they were for educational purposes only specifically for research studies. As per ethical considerations, the researchers observed respect of privacy, avoid misinterpretations, and honest analysis on the gender-sensitive language in the persuasive essays of BAELS students.

2.4 Data Analysis

Problem 1. This was answered by identifying all the gender-sensitive language that can be found in the persuasive essays of BAELS 4th year. This was further answered then the gender neutrality in English.

Problem 2. After identifying the gender neutrality in English, it was analyzed through their usage whether they are used as gender neutral nouns, gender neutral pronouns, job titles, personal titles and naming practices.

Problem 3. This was answered through examining the frequency of usage of gender-sensitive language and the way they used those languages.

3. Results and Discussions

This chapter presents the results, discussions, and analysis of the gathered essays from BAELS senior students during the Academic Year 2021-2022.

1. What are the gender-sensitive languages found in the persuasive essays of the BAELS fourth year?

The gender-sensitive languages that were used by the said respondents are presented in the table below.

Table 1. Frequency of Students' Gender-sensitive language

Gender-sensitive Language	Gender-biased	Frequency
People/Human beings	men/women/boy/girl	23
Police officer	police man/policewoman	1
Businessperson	businessman/businesswoman	1
Sales associate	salesman/clerk	1
Fire fighter	fireman/firewoman	1
Flight attendant	stewardess	1
Educators	male/female educators	2
Professors	male/female professors	3
Teachers	male/female teachers	41
Instructors	male/female instructors	10
School staff	male/female school staffs	1
Students/learners	male/female students	82
Classmates/schoolmates	male/female classmates/schoolmates	3
Society	society of men and women	9
Human rights	man rights	8
Parents	mother/father	2
Everyone	all men and women	2
Pupils	girls and boys	3
Individuals/persons	man/woman/boy/girl	12
Them/they	he/she/him/her	3
Total		209

Table 1 presents the gender-sensitive languages and its frequency of use from the analyzed essays of BAELS senior students. It shows that out of 209 total no. of gender-sensitive languages, the word "students/learners" is the most frequently used with 82 counts, followed by the word "teachers" with 41 counts and "people/human beings" with 23 counts. The word "individuals/persons" are often used with 12 counts, and "instructors" with 10 counts. Meanwhile, the words "society" and "human rights" were seldom used with 9 and 8 counts respectively, and word "pupils" and "professors" with 3 counts. The less frequently used gender-sensitive languages with 2 counts are the words "parents", "educators" and "everyone" and the barely used words are the "police officer", "businessperson", "sales associate", "fire-fighter", "flight attendant", and "school staff" with 1 count for

each word/ term. These phenomena can be explained by the structure of English in terms of natural gender languages where personal nouns are often gender-neutral and referential gender is stated pronominally (e.g. he/she). The same phenomena can be observed in languages like Swedish, Finnish and Turkish that neither personal nouns nor pronouns indicate gender as revealed by Hellinger and Bussmann (2001).

The table above presents the frequency of use on Gender-sensitive language which indicates that qualities such as male/female [teacher]' or noun, pronoun and job titles including gender-specific terms such as male and female characterize the gender and linguistic gender inequalities are much more apparent in grammatical gender languages than in natural gender languages or genderless languages (Hellinger and Bussmann, 2001).

2. How are the gender-sensitive languages used in the essays?

First, gender-sensitive languages are used as "Gender Neutral Nouns" by the BAELS fourth year students. Gender-neutral nouns are nouns used to refer to subject(s) whose gender is unclear or variable, or to groups that contain people who are not actually men. Most English nouns do not have grammatical gender forms, for example teacher or president. Words ending in man are the most commonly used gendered nouns in English. These words are easy to spot and replace with more neutral language. For example, instead of the gendered noun "mankind," you can use the words "people" or "humanity" or "human beings." Instead of the gendered "freshman," you can also use the words "first-year student."

In the persuasive essays of the BAELS fourth year, the word "students/learners" is the most frequently used with 82 counts. This is substantiated by the following excerpts:

"Gender equality use to mean providing both equal access and equal outcomes for all students regardless of their gender equality meant providing students with the exact same rather providing students with opportunities and experiences based on what they needed."

The word "students" is used as a gender-neutral noun because it does not clarify whether it is a boy or a girl. But it denotes a student in general.

"As students start processing ideas and opinions from a younger age, teachers play a significant task in elevating distinctions of gender. By this, the teachers are able to create equal educational opportunities for the students."

The use of gender-neutral nouns is to reduce as much as possible the use of gender-specific terms. In order to avoid gender references, one can use gender-neutral noun terms, i.e. words that are not gender-specific and refer to people in general, with no reference to women or men.

"Despite the differences we have in a classroom, teachers treat students equally during classes. During oral-recitation, teachers are picking both genders to hear their opinions even though boys are straightforward when they answer such questions unlike

girls' opinions wherein, they tend to give more words just to clarify what they wanted to speak out."

Moreover, based on the responses gathered from the respondents, they imply that gender equality is now prevalently acknowledged in the classrooms, especially among students because they are aware of the different gender sexualities present in their classrooms, and that they embrace the diversity through considering gendering equality whenever they write their essays.

"It says that the best educational environments are those that treat educators and students, male or female fairly. Teachers are paying attention to the trends that students are engaging, and teachers are being neutral when giving response to male and female students."

The term teacher is a neutral word that does not define someone's specific gender. It is a term that draws all gender identities. Teacher could be gay, lesbian, straight and either transman or transwoman but they still be disguised according to their sexes. Thus, by using the word teacher can avoid offensive endearment to address them as Mr. and Miss most especially to all transformed teachers according to their preferred gender. Here are some examples of the gender-neutral term 'teacher' that are found in the persuasive essays of BAELS fourth year.

"Teachers are important starting points for promoting gender equality in education as their attitudes and instructional practices are known to influence students' motivation and performance substantially. To promote girls and boys equally in coeducational settings, teachers have to reflect on their own gender stereotypes"

The excerpts from the respondents' responses imply that teachers are helpful in promoting a good gender-sensitive environment within the school and among their students - given that the learners opt to follow their lead. In line with that, the term "teacher" was found out to be one of the most used gender sensitive words in the essays of the students of BAELS fourth year. Nonetheless, BAELS fourth year are also embracing the diversity of gender sexuality through respecting the genders present in their classroom which is mostly expressed through their gender sensitivity.

"It was said that the classroom is one of the areas that become a tool for some people to grow and learn not only about the lessons the teacher teaches but also it becomes a factor that has played a significant role in understanding and defining oneself."

The excerpt above used people instead of man/men. Using this gender-neutral noun helps include people who are not identified as men or women like the nonbinary gender. The term people/human beings is one of the most used gender sensitive words in the essays of the BAELS fourth year students since it is best for expressing thoughts and ideas that aims to generalize to contradict gender biases.

"Gender awareness raises women and men's understanding of gender equality, the benefits of a more gender-equal society, and the consequences of gender bias. Gender equality is a win-win situation for all."

The word "society" is one of the most gender-neutral words where it generalizes all people that involves all gender spectrum present in the world. With that, this term is usually used to proclaim unity since it tackles people as a whole unit regardless of the gender differences they have.

"It is important that gender equality involves empowering all students and providing them with the same human rights. It also includes correcting biases students holds about themselves or gender identities other than their own."

Human right is technically a gender sensitive word since it depicts humans, and it is given that humans may vary when it comes to having their genders. However, despite that technicality, human rights about gender issues are just starting to blossom because back in the days, rights on gender and sexuality were not given much attention.

"Gender equality is promoted in schools also; students are taught about gender biases and any gender issues to aware students of how to be gender sensitive. From kinder to high school, aside from our parents, we are taught how to "makikipagkapwa-tao", to be kind to others, to respect, and so on despite the differences."

The word parent is gender sensitive because it obviously denotes parenting among people who have children regardless of gender. Nowadays, the word "parents" is not just limited to men and women because parenting is now embraced by all genders regardless of genders at all costs. Moreover, the term "parent" evokes gender norms when it comes to parenting since it is intended to generalize parenthood.

"All individuals are very diverse in nature especially the identity on how to socially label ourselves in the society. We are sometimes confused to answer, "Who Am I?" and "What Am I?" then we ponder how to answer these questions aside from we are built into sexes the male and female."

The term "individual or person" refers to anyone in the world. Also, it is a representation used to refer to human beings. Hence, it is a generalized word that is intended to refer to different gendered people existing in the world.

"The world is now opening to a better perspective about what is more about Gender and the deeper meaning behind the word itself, where students have been given the chance to learn about it, and the fact that women are also setting examples everywhere about what they can contribute to society despite people's traditional mindsets, I think we should all highlight this to show that everyone should be granted equal rights and that no one's abilities, student or not, should be questioned."

The word "everyone" is one of the most gender sensitive words used by people because it technically generalizes for all people. Hence, anyone can be a part of the "everyone" which implies that even the different gender spectrum is included.

The second usage of gender-sensitive language is "job titles". A gender-neutral job title, is one that does not specify or imply gender, such as firefighter or lawyer. In some cases, it may be debat-

able whether a title is gender-specific; for example, chairman appears to denote a male (because of the ending -man), but the title is also applied sometimes to women.

Around the 20th century, the gender-neutral use of man and -man declined. Thus, job titles that include this suffix, such as fireman, salesman and alderman, generally imply that the holder is male. While some of these job titles have feminine variants (e.g. alderwoman), others do not, because traditionally the positions in question were not occupied by women. For most such titles, gender-neutral equivalents now also exist, such as police officer (for policeman or policewoman), salesperson or sales representative (for salesman or saleswoman). This is substantiated by the following excerpts:

“Gender equality means that all genders are free to pursue whatever career like police officer, businessperson, sales associate, fire fighter, or they can be flight attendant, etc; lifestyle choice, and abilities they want without discrimination.”

The term police officer is a job title or as it speaks for profession specifically to all the police staff and people regardless of the gender they have. Moreover, this term is more applicable than specifying the gender of the police officer and indicating policeman or policewoman because this will not be able to help to abolish the discriminations and critiques from people about gender norms.

“Gender equality means that all genders are free to pursue whatever career like police officer, businessperson, sales associate, fire fighter, or they can be flight attendant, etc; lifestyle choice, and abilities they want without discrimination.”

The word “businessperson” is the best term that can be used in essays to prevent biases about who is superior and inferior in terms of business. Furthermore, it deteriorates the thought of having gender roles in the field of business and critiques from people about gender norms.

“Gender equality means that all genders are free to pursue whatever career like police officer, businessperson, sales associate, fire fighter, or they can be flight attendant, etc; lifestyle choice, and abilities they want without discrimination.”

Using sales associate instead of salesman considered to be a bit more respectful, provide inclusion for all genders and that they are treated with equal status. We can normalize the idea that anyone can perform a job, regardless of their gender identity. When describing a job or career men, women and non-binary gender might perform so avoid using combined term that specifies gender because it minimalizes their contributions and their worth as human beings.

“Gender equality means that all genders are free to pursue whatever career like police officer, businessperson, sales associate, fire fighter, or they can be flight attendant, etc; lifestyle choice, and abilities they want without discrimination.”

The term firefighter is indeed a gender sensitive word which is why it is fit for generalizing a thought involving firefighters re-

gardless of their genders. Furthermore, they are appropriate in write ups that deny gender norms, and thus, it is considerably a word for all.

“Gender equality means that all genders are free to pursue whatever career like police officer, businessperson, sales associate, fire fighter, or they can be flight attendant, etc; lifestyle choice, and abilities they want without discrimination.”

The flight attendant is a gender sensitive word. The terms stewardess and stewards describe the same basic job of tending to airplane passengers’ needs and safety however is an outdated term that has been replaced by “flight attendant” on all airlines. Awareness of gender equality in the organization creates a gender balance.

The third usage of gender-sensitive languages is “gender-neutral pronouns”. Gender neutral pronouns are words that don’t specify whether the subject of the sentence is female or male. ‘They’, for instance, is a third-person pronoun that is gender neutral. Other gender-neutral pronouns include ‘them’, ‘this person’ and ‘everyone’. If you’re not sure which pronoun to use, you can also use that person’s name. This is substantiated by the excerpt below:

“Gender equality is achieved when women, men, girls and boys have equal rights, conditions and opportunities, and the power to shape their own lives and contribute to the development of society. It is a matter of equitable distribution of power, influence and resources in society.”

The word “them or they” is a gender-neutral pronoun word usually used for pointing out thoughts that are set in a third person-point of view. Hence, it is great for defining people who may happen to have varied gender orientations.

3. Do the essays represent the students’ awareness of gender-sensitive language?

There is a clear manifestation of the students’ awareness on gender-sensitive language through their usage of gender-neutral nouns, gender neutral pronouns, and job titles. The presence of gender-sensitive language in their essays reflects not only their gender ideas but also affects how they perceive the social environment and their position within it as a man or a woman. It is crucial for them as communicators to identify and respect changes in the meaning and appropriateness of words because our language and culture are reflections of one another.

According to the findings of the study, the essays of the students represent their awareness towards gender-sensitive language because it showed in the data gathered that most of the students used gender-sensitive words in conveying their thoughts in their essays which is an implication of their awareness about the existence of the gender-sensitive language. Furthermore, this implies that the BAELS fourth year are open to varied gender orientations which was manifested through their essays. Furthermore, the students were able to use gender sensitive language when they depicted ideas that use gender-specific terms but instead, they chose to write them in a gender sensitive language which conveys that

the students are trying to break the phenomenon of having gender norms.

Gender sensitive language is attained when women and men and those who do not conform to the binary gender system – are addressed through language as persons of equal value, dignity, integrity and respect. This was supported by the Global Gender Gap Index of the World Economic Forum which study focused on the assessment of gender equality (Hausmann et al., 2009). It was discovered that nations with grammatical gender languages had lower levels of social gender equality than those with natural gender languages or genderless languages. This indicates that a greater exposure of gender disparities is accompanied with gender inequality in society.

4. Conclusion

Based on the findings, the researchers concluded that fourth year BAELS students are using gender-sensitive languages in writing essays; this can be seen through their usage of gender-neutral nouns, gender-neutral pronouns and job titles; and they are aware of gender equality because students are seeking for neutrality and equality in all aspect.

Implications

Students' growing awareness of the fact that some words' apparent meanings have changed due to the shifting roles of men and women in our society contributes to our concern over the usage of sexist language. Gender-neutral language reduces unwarranted gender concerns in our subject matter, allowing students to concentrate on what is important. Instead of acting according to their sex, people do. For instance, in the routine. It is problematic to use the terms "he" and "man" in general. Gender-sensitive language scaffolds learning as students of different gender can participate in class without feeling left out or marginalized. Allowing them to converse in a way that is deemed appropriate with regards to the classroom rules will help them reach their full potential.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings, conclusions and implications the researchers advanced the following recommendations:

1. Teachers should be aware of the vital role that they play in their students' life. Being shamed or disrespected as a person based on one's gender affects the person physically and mentally so it best if teachers as role model would give equal attention to students of different genders regardless of their personal biases or prejudices towards LGBTQ+ community.
2. Students should be exposed more on webinar or activities about gender-equality, and gender issues should be talked about in the classroom to give awareness to students for them to become more gender-sensitive individuals.
3. Future researchers may conduct comparative studies considering other participants who don't have language and gender subjects.
4. Future researchers may conduct similar studies in classroom situations to find out teachers and students' awareness on gender sensitive language.

Acknowledgements

The researchers would like to thank the fourth year Bachelor of Arts in English Language Studies students who served as the respondents of the study for patiently writing the persuasive essays and to all people who in one way or another contributed much to the completion of the paper.

REFERENCES

- Hellinger, M., & Bussmann, H. (Eds.). (2001). *Gender Across Languages. The Linguistic Representation of Women and Men* (Vol. 1).
- Hausmann M. (2008). Interactive effects of sex hormones and gender stereotypes on cognitive sex differences--a psychobiosocial approach. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18992993/>
- Marlowe, M. (2001). *The Usage of Gender- Sensitive Language in the 21st Century*. University of Belgrade.
- Penelope E. (2001). Stanford University, California, Sally McConnell-Ginet, Cornell University, New York
- Menegati and Rubini (2013). Convincing Similar and Dissimilar Others: The Power of Language Abstraction in Political Communication. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0146167213479404>
- Maass, Salvi, and Semin (1989). Language use in intergroup contexts: the linguistic intergroup bias. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/2614663/>
- Rubini et al (2014). Gender-Biased Language of the Workplace https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338468380_Gender-Biased_Language_of_the_Workplace
- Wigboldus and Douglas (2007). Language, Stereotypes, and Intergroup Relations. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203837702-4/language-stereotypes-intergroup-relations-dani%C3%ABl-wigboldus-karen-douglas>