# Strategies for Dealing with Gender-related Language in TESOL:    A Prescriptive or Descriptive Approach?

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*Abstract: Gender-related language use has been of concern to linguists and language teachers for several decades. In more recent times, those involved in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) have been faced with decisions about what to teach and how to teach in light of the findings of research into gender-related language in English. This paper reviews some of the research in this field and identifies key themes that have been identified. It seeks to address the dichotomy between the prescriptive and descriptive approaches to TESOL that arise from consideration of issues surrounding gender-related language use. The conclusion drawn is that the primary role of TESOL professionals is to present the language as it is used even if that means presenting language that appears to be masculine dominated in certain linguistic features.*

*Key Words: TESOL, gender-related language, prescriptive approach, descriptive approach*

## 1. Introduction

This paper presents a brief review of major research findings in the field of gender-related language use and will identify two major approaches these findings have led TESOL professionals to adopt with regard to the teaching strategies they practise. Firstly, a review of four key areas of research will be given with reference to the relevant literature. These are (1) use of the masculine form for generic purposes, (2) gender-related speech forms, (3) conversational strategies, and (4) gender-related use of tags. Secondly, the implications of these findings will be discussed within the context of the TESOL classroom. Thirdly, two possible roles of the teacher using the findings of the gender-related language speech research will be presented and assessed. Finally, conclusions will be drawn as to how TESOL professionals can best utilise the knowledge that gender-related language studies have shown.

Although this paper addresses the issues of gender-related language in English, it is important to note that the linguistic forms used by men and women differ, to varying degrees, in all speech communities. In addition, gender-related language is 'often just one aspect of more pervasive

linguistic differences in the society reflecting social status or power differences' (Holmes, 2008, p. 166). Gender-related language use, then, 'inevitably raises issues of power and inequality between women and men' (Mesthrie et. al. 2009, p.246). Indeed, since the 1970s research into language and gender has focused on the role language plays in the location and maintenance of women in a subordinate position in society.

## 2. Key Areas of Gender-related Research

Four key areas of gender-related language research have been identified for discussion: (1) the generic use of masculine forms and their consequences; (2) gender and standard language, and suggested reasons for the use of particular forms by specific groups; (3) gender and speech styles; and (4) the gender-related use of questions tags.

### 2.1 The Generic Use of Masculine Forms

Freeman and McElhinney (1996) suggest that discussions of gender-related language have often concentrated on what Martyna (1983) refers to as the *he/man* approach to language, in which masculine terms are used to refer to males in particular and to human beings in general. Fasold (1990) also concludes that lexical items which are semantically male have traditionally been used generically where the sex of the referent is unknown or irrelevant. Holmes (2008) states that the use of *he* and *man* as generic forms provide a strong basis to the claim that 'English renders women invisible' (p.338). The following examples serve to illustrate this point. *Man is the dominant species on earth. One small step for man: one giant leap for mankind. Manners maketh man. He who laughs last laughs longest. He who fights and runs away lives to fight another day.*

Early research in the field, such as that by Bodine (1975) and Martyna (1980), into people's responses to generic uses of masculine forms showed quite clearly that this usage has the effect of excluding women. When *he* is used, 'regardless of the intent of the speaker or the writer to use it in the generic senses, it will almost always be heard as excluding female referents' (Fasold, 1990, p.113). Therefore, those who claim that *he* and *man* can continue to be used as generic terms are ignoring the fact that for many people these terms are firmly established as referring to the male (Holmes, 2008).

### 2.2 Gender and Standard Language

In many speech communities, women have a tendency to use what is generally the standard or overtly prestigious form of speech. Conversely, men are often found to use 'socially disfavored variants of sociolinguistic variables' (Fasold, 1990, p.92). Evidence of this pattern was established many decades ago by Labov (1966) in New York, by Wolfram (1969) in Detroit, by Trudgill (1974) in Norwich, by Macaulay (1978) in Glasgow, and by Milroy (1982, 1987) in Belfast. In spite of the fact that women tend to introduce and use the socially favoured prestige

forms of speech, it is men's usage which is taken as the norm against which women's speech is measured.

Several explanations for this pattern have been proposed. Firstly, Fasold (1990) argues, 'by sounding *less* local, female speakers might be protesting traditional community norms which place them in a subordinate position to men' (p.96). Secondly, those in subordinate positions are expected to be polite. As such, women's use of standard speech forms may be a reflection of their sensitivity to contextual factors. Therefore, by using standard variants, a woman is protecting her own face and catering to her need to be valued by society. Thirdly, some linguists suggest that women use more standard forms because they are more status-conscious than men (Holmes, 2008). Fourthly, communities tend to expect better behaviour from women than from men: since women are designated the role of modelling correct behaviour in society. Hence, women are expected to speak more correctly and use more standard forms than men, particularly when they serve as models for children's speech.

## 2.3 Gender and Speech Styles

Another productive area of research into gender-related language is the analysis of conversations between men and women. Zimmerman and West (1975), and West and Zimmerman (1977) formulated a definition of *interruption* designed to distinguish between (a) interruptions and (b) overlaps and back-channels. In a further study, in ten same-sex interactions, there were just seven interruptions, which were fairly evenly distributed between the speakers. However, in eleven cross-sex interactions, there were 48 interruptions, with the male speaker responsible for 46 of these interruptions (West and Zimmerman, 1983). The researchers concluded that interruptions (and silences) contributed to topic-control by the men. The men either intruded with their own talk where the 'simplest systematics' would have given them no right to speak, or they failed to offer support for topics being developed by women (Fasold, 1990).

Fishman (1980, 1983) found further evidence indicating men have more control than women in cross-sex conversations. Women used far more strategies than men did to enhance the chances that what they were saying would be attended to. Fishman interpreted question-asking as one of the means by which women try to compel attention to what they are saying; since they might otherwise not get attention from a male conversation partner. 'One interpretation of these findings is that males use interruptions in order to assert their dominance, and in the absence of a better alternative we have to accept this' (Hudson, 1996, p.142).

## 2.4 Gender and Question Tags

As long ago as the 1970s, Lakoff (1975) illustrated that women asked more questions than men and paid more attention to tag questions and statements with question intonation. She suggested that greater use of these forms by women means that women, more often than men, present themselves as unsure of their opinions and thereby as not having opinions that count for very

much. Furthermore, Lakoff claimed that women use hedging devices and intensifying devices to boost the force of their utterances because they think that otherwise they will not be heard or paid attention to. Therefore, in Lakoff's view, both hedges and boosters reflect women's lack of confidence. She concluded that 'woman's language' (language used to describe women and language typically used by women) had the effect of submerging a woman's personal identity (Lakoff, 1973). However, as Holmes (2008) points out, these devices are not exclusive to women, since 'teachers, interviewers, hosts at parties and, in general, those in leadership roles who are responsible for the success of an interaction tend to use tags in this facilitative way' (p.318).

Nevertheless, it would appear that the norms for women's speech are the norms for private, small group conversation, in which goals are stressing solidarity and maintaining good relations: aimed at seeking agreement and avoiding disagreement. Conversely, the norms of male speech interaction appear to be those of public 'referentially-oriented interaction' (Holmes, 2008, p.329). This model is an adversarial one, in which contradiction and disagreement are likely to occur. With these contrasting models of interaction for men's and women's speech and the different expectations each has of the function of the interaction, miscommunication between the sexes would appear to be inevitable in many cases.

### 3. Implications of Research Findings for TESOL Professionals

The studies reviewed above have shown that there are many ways in which gender-related language reflects and might perpetuate the position of women within communities. Indeed, research into the relationship between language and gender has been, in general, motivated by the need to identify and eliminate the causes of gender-related social disadvantage. This research has helped educationalists and other interested parties to (a) recognise elements in gender-related language and discourse (naming devices, generic *he/man* and other lexical items) and thus, identify 'sexist' language; and (b) have a deeper understanding of how men and women communicate differently: knowledge which can be utilised to guide learners to use communication strategies appropriately.

Some TESOL professionals have adopted several prescriptive strategies to overcome gender-related linguistic (and social) bias. They believe that 'conventions of representation can be deconstructed and reconstructed if they are found to disadvantage groups ' (Freeman and McElhinney, 1996, p.224). This deconstruction-reconstruction process can be initiated by adopting particular strategies within the language learning environment. Since language is constantly in flux, language change can be led so that 'it is possible to negotiate social identities through alternative language use' (Freeman and McElhinney, 1996, p.261). This prescriptive approach, i.e., the provision of remedies to *degenderise* or neutralise the language, challenges existing gender-related linguistic forms, with a view to reducing gender-related disadvantage. Clearly, the motivation behind this approach is social and political change.

Other TESOL professionals have adopted descriptive strategies to provide learners with a better understanding of the differences in gender-related language use. These teachers present knowledge of the language and reflect the language in its current state, rather than attempt to affect change in the use of language. This descriptive approach, i.e., showing English as it is, rather than how it might be, does not challenge existing gender-related forms, but provides learners with strategies for recognising and dealing with them appropriately. The motivation behind this approach is to offer learners the knowledge and skills they need to communicate effectively.

This dichotomy of approaches is not easily reconciled, and it is not possible for TESOL professionals to adopt a middle way between prescriptivism and descriptivism. Either English language teachers reject gender-related language and set out to change it and teach alternatives to the existing forms and usage, or they accept it and perpetuate those forms and usage. TESOL professionals must decide what their primary function is and recognise what learners expect from them. The following discussion will attempt to show that the language teacher's primary responsibility is should be to teach the language, not change it.

### 3.1 A Prescriptive Approach

In light of the findings of research into gender-related language in English, it has been suggested that TESOL professionals should raise awareness of issues surrounding the use of gender-related language and attempt to teach English in a manner that prescribes ways to neutralise or, at least, minimise the use of particular masculine forms. To this end, numerous suggestions for teaching strategies to promote the use of non-gender-related language have been proposed: strategies whose goals are clearly derived from Western liberal notions of social and political correctness.

Firstly, TESOL teachers can help to negate the problems associated with the generic use of the masculine pronouns by adopting a particular stance with regard to the use of certain lexical items. Freeman and McElhinney (1996, p.224-225) offer the following suggestions. (1) The masculine pronoun should be avoided where possible. (2) Sentences should be written and spoken in the plural rather than the singular. (3) The pronouns *he* and *his* should be substituted by *one* or *one's*. (4) *He or she*, *his or her* should be the written and spoken forms, while *s/he* should be used in the written form. (5) When the subject is an indefinite pronoun, *their* should be used.

The first four suggestions present no problems to learners, since grammatically they are acceptable. However, many learners will not accept, and will often argue against, the use of *their* as an indefinite pronoun in the way proposed. This reluctance creates a clash of authority between the person presenting the language-teaching material, i.e., the teacher, and the trusted and technically accurate grammar books that so many learners rely on. Learners might choose grammatical accuracy over political correctness, particularly in situations in which grammar

competency is a major examinable subject. This situation can lead to serious issues of credibility for teachers who choose to insist on such 'ungrammatical' usage.

Secondly, TESOL teachers might encourage cross-cultural discussion of the traditional stereotypes learners have with regard to men and women and to consider the implications of those stereotypes. This discussion will open the way for teachers to invite learners to 'look for alternative representations' (Freeman and McElhinney, 1996, p.266). However, although language cannot be completely separated from culture, English is now an international language, a world language, irrespective of culture. Indeed, the term 'World Englishes' is now commonly accepted in the field of TESOL and sociolinguistics. Thus, English is becomingly increasingly divorced from the culture that spawned it. Accepting 'English' culture is no longer a prerequisite nor a requirement for speaking and using the English language. Therefore, looking for and offering alternative, i.e., Western liberal, representations is part of a social and political agenda and one which TESOL professionals in many countries might be wise to avoid so as not to be in conflict with local cultural norms.

Thirdly, TESOL teachers who are aware of the consequences of gender-related language can use that knowledge to change the group dynamics within their classes so that female learners are not linguistically and socially disadvantaged or subordinated. While this suggestion appears very plausible in theory, when put into practice, it may simply place female learners at an even greater disadvantage. If female learners are encouraged to behave in the language classroom in ways which are not the norm within their own culture, the environment will be one of pressure, embarrassment and, possibly, hostility. Learners my relate the use of English language with negative associations, and thus, might be discouraged from pursuing further study of the language. In this event, ironically, female learners will be denied the opportunity to learn the language by the insensitivity of the teacher's political and social agenda.

It can be seen, then, that TESOL professionals adopting the prescriptive approach place emphasis on analysing the language for its use in certain social and cultural contexts. Attention is given to developing awareness of, and attempting to avoid, certain gender-related language features as part of a drive to promote an agenda of social or political correctness. By adopting this approach, prescriptivists are imposing their own notions of social and political correctness onto the language and onto how their learners view and use English.

### 3.2 A Descriptive Approach

It could be argued that the traditional role of teachers, generally, has been to describe how things are and how things can be used. The TESOL professional who adopts a descriptive approach is, therefore, following a long-held tradition within education. Given clear descriptions, learners are able to understand and apply the knowledge and skills imparted by the teacher. The *raison d'etre* of TESOL is to teach English language, it is not to present and promulgate Western liberal social

and political ideologies. If, indeed, social change can occur through language, communicative competence is essential. With clear knowledge and ability to use language comes the ability to learn, to consider and to express new ideas in new ways. This aim can be achieved by using the descriptive approach in several ways.

Firstly, learners of English need to understand as clearly as possible the gender-related distinctions that exist within the language. Information about the diversity within a language is not only important, it is also essential for understanding the society whose language they are learning (Wolfson, 1989, p.230). This implies that learners need to be aware of the language in its current state. Once learners have this knowledge, they may then make their own decisions as to whether or not to reduce the frequency of gender-related forms and lexical items. For language learning and teaching to be successful, the focus should be on what learners can actually use, not on what some people believe they should not use.

Secondly, learning the range of speech acts, their social significance, and the social identities that they are normatively and actually associated with is necessary for acquiring truly communicative competence in a language (Freeman and McElhinney, 1996, p.235). This competence involves not only *understanding*, but also *using* gender-related language, since this is an integral part of English language as it is today. Learners need to know that, although political correctness may in some cases be desirable, there are many situations in which the use of gender-related linguistic forms is not only preferable but expected. Learners who are not taught the correct collocations, for example, will not thank the teacher for imparting politically correct language, which might be contextually (and/or grammatically) inappropriate. Indeed, in an attempt to be politically correct, many language users might struggle to be communicatively competent.

Thirdly, if learners know 'how to look, how to ask questions, and how to listen in order to account for when, where, by whom, to whom, in what manner, and in what particular circumstances particular speech acts are used' (Freeman and McElhinney, 1996, p.268), they can transfer that knowledge and use it in other interactional contexts. By encouraging learners to investigate language and its use, teachers can encourage learners to discover the language as it exists and, thereby, lead them to question the social and political effect of the particular lexical items and structures might have. With this maturity of understanding, learners can select their own linguistic strategies for dealing with gender-related language and other sociolinguistic issues.

Fourthly, from the language learners' point of view, it would appear that much of the sociocultural and sociolinguistic information and skills they require to be communicatively competent across cultures must be acquired by exposure and interaction with other speakers of English, many of whom will also be second- or third-language users of English, and who might not share a Western liberal view of the world. Therefore, it is essential that learners be introduced to English language and the use of the language as it exists if they are to be

communicatively competent in different sociocultural contexts. English, like any other language, is not an idealised, utopian form of communication devoid of bias of any kind. As such, TESOL professionals should teach the actual form of the language, irrespective of whether certain conventional linguistic features are politically unacceptable to them. Learners want to know and use the English that is currently in use, not the English that some members of society would prefer to be used.

From the above, it can be seen that TESOL professionals adopting the descriptive approach place emphasis on showing learners the features of the language, such as lexis and grammatical structures, and providing practice in how these features are used. Attention is firmly placed on the language itself rather than on a particular perception of the social or political correctness of certain forms, such as those which are gender-related.

## 4. Conclusion

Research over recent decades across the field of gender-related language has led to the identification and, to some extent, the stereotyping of certain differences in men's and women's speech, and it is arguable that these stereotypes, although based on consistencies in particular gender-related patters, have been overstated. However, it could prove erroneous to ignore the considerable amount of evidence from the research that demonstrates their existence. While it may be necessary for TESOL professionals to challenge straightforward 'binary' gender distinctions (Mesthrie et. al., 2009), 'we need to be aware of the findings concerning the differences between men's and women's speech so that we will not teach inappropriate forms to our students' (Wolfson, 1989, p.162). Therefore, rather than focusing on which linguistic features are used disproportionately by men and women, sociolinguists should concentrate on analysing the different interactional strategies employed by men and women (Fasold, 1990). Freeman and McElhinney (1996) conclude that although *what* is talked about helps determine gender roles, and understanding of *how* men and women position themselves and each other through their interactions is equally, if not more, important. Hence, it is an understanding of the appropriate patterns of interaction, and knowledge of *how* and *when* to use them that TESOL professionals should present, teach and encourage learners to put into practice.

The promotion of Western liberal notions of social and political correctness, with which the prescriptive approach is associated, might conflict with social and cultural norms in many societies in which people are learning and using English. Today, English is the foremost international language, and the emergence of World Englishes must allow for culturally-specific and culturally-acceptable use of English wherever it is being used. The prescriptive approach assumes that English is in need of repair: to rid it of the ills of masculine domination. However, advocates of the descriptive approach make no such judgment and simply present the English language as it is used. Once learners have been taught and own the language themselves, they should have the confidence to adopt and adapt English to meet their own personal, social and

cultural needs. It is for these reasons that a descriptive approach to gender-related language is more beneficial to English language learners than a prescriptive one: since learners need to know the language in its current state, not how some people believe it could be or should be.

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