

## Gender in the Written Texts of Learners of English as a Second Language in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka

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### **Abstract**

This study examined gender in the written texts of students of English as Second Language (ESL). The study investigated the terms used by students who have English as their second language using the students of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka as the study population to verify if there is gender difference in ESL writing. The data used for the study were collected from five faculties in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Two hundred texts written by two hundred students of these faculties were collated and analysed in order to determine gender differences in the writing of the study sample. The researchers used Argamon's gender indicators for the study. The findings of the study reveal that there is no gender difference in the writings of students who use English as a Second Language; whereas some native speakers and writers of English, Linguists, posit that men and women have different ways of speaking and writing. The researchers adopted a quantitative and qualitative approach in the discussion and interpretation of the data, and they relied on the descriptive survey design.

**Key Words:** Gender, written texts, learners, English as a Second Language, gender differences

### **Introduction**

In recent years, language learning and language research have been based on gender as a variable. Most studies focused on communication

through speech. It has been argued that there are consistent differences in speech, (Holmes, 1993). Most works investigated differences between male and female language use in speech, (Labov 1990; Argamon, Shlomo, Moshe Koppel, Jonathan Fine and Anat Rachel Shimon 2013). This provides evidence that the speaking skill is commonly used to measure language ability. It has been fairly proved across a variety of contexts that females seem to talk more about relationships than do males, (Aries & Johnson 1983; Tannen 1990 cited in Argamon et. al.) and use more compliments and apologies, (Holmes, 1988) and facilitative tag questions, (Holmes, 1984). Holmes has also suggested that females are more attentive to the affective function of conversations and more prone to use linguistic devices that solidify relationships. We agree with these linguists that men and women speak differently. Linguistic researchers have been trying over the years to identify and interpret possible differences in linguistic styles between males and females, (Lakoff, 1975; Labov, 1990; Coates, 1998). A few others examined students' essays (Mulac et al 1990; Mulac & Lundell 1994). Waskita goes on to cite Lillis, stressing the importance of students' writing in higher education. Writing, per se, is a "key assessment tool, with students passing on (sic) failing courses according to the ways in which they respond to, and engage in academic writing tasks" (Waskita, 2008). The main objective of this study is to ascertain if there is gender differences in English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' writing and to what extent do the emergent texts reflect gender differences in writing. In order to carry out this research, two hundred final year students of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka were randomly selected from five faculties and given a certified essay topic to write on. The data were collated and statistically analysed and interpreted using Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) program of Jame

W. Pennebaker, Roger J. Booth, and Martha E. Francis which is one of the commonly used tools in analysing language.

### **Gender in Writing**

In recent years, language learning and language research have been based on gender as a variable. Most studies focused on communication through speech. It has been argued that there are consistent differences in speech (Holmes). Most works investigate differences between male and female language use in speech (Labov; Argamon et al). Studies on gender differences in writing are fewer than those on gender and speaking (Waskita 449). There are two schools of thought on this issue. The first school of thought believes that there is a difference and that the difference is biological. Jespersen who is one of the proponents of this theory is cited by Coates as stating:

If we compare sentences as constructed by men and women we shall find in the former many more instances of intricate structure with clause within clause or vice versa, with subordination and subordination while the typical form of long feminine periods is that of co-ordination, one sentence or clause being added to another on the same plane. In learned terminology we say that men are fond of hypo taxis, and women of para taxis (113).

Other scholars with the same view are Lakoff and Corsen. While Lakoff observes that women use more question tags than men, Corsen observes that “while men make twice as many statements, women ask more than twice as many questions” (113). Different studies produced different results on gender and writing. Punter and Burchell’s study cited in Waskita showed that girls scored better in writing imaginatively, reflectively and

empathetically while boys scored better in writing argumentatively and factually (450). Joan Swann and Romatowssthi and Trepanier-Street argue that the difference between girls and boys lies in the perceptions and preferences of girls and boys about writing. They opine that girls tend to have positive feeling about writing while boys are negative.

The second school of thought believes that “there is no positive correlation between language ability and sex” (113). One of the proponents, Klan-delius, contends that it is “gender socialization rather than overt biological factors that is responsible for any observed differences in language ability between the sexes.

Meinhof cited by Waskita conducted a research on adult writing and found that male and female students wrote similar kinds of texts (450).

Vali and Kiahiparsa (web) also conducted a research on gender differences in using cohesive devices while writing. They emerged with the result that there is no gender difference in using cohesive devices while writing in English.

Waskita posits that “the structure of women’s texts tended to be more complex than the men’s. The women also used more paraphrases to integrate cited information, and presented better organized arguments” (448). This shows that Waskita supports that there are differences in men’s and women’s writing. Considering the arguments and conflicting reports on this issue of gender and writing, as seen above, this study, therefore, seeks to find out if differences exist between male and female writings using students’ essays as study samples.

### **Determining Gender in Writing**

According to Barrette, there is difference between men and women writing. She stipulates that it can be determined “based on counting how often certain words appear in a sample of text” (np). Barrette posits that the

difference is related to grammar rather than content, and is “structural as well as topical” (np).

It is believed that female writers use more pronouns (I, you, she, their, myself) and males prefer words that identify or determine nouns (noun specifiers – a, the, that) and words that quantify them (one, two, more) (Barrette & Argamon, Koppel, Fine & Shimoni 2013). For this study the researchers classified all the propositions in two categories as shown in the table below:

| <b>TERMS USED MORE BY MALES</b>                                      | <b>TERMS USED MORE BY FEMALES</b>   |
|--|---|
| Determiners - a, an, the, that, these                                | Pronouns – I, you, she, her, their, myself, yourself, herself, he, him, himself   |
| Plural pronouns – we, us, they, them                                 | Negation and Preposition – with, if, not, in                                      |
| Inanimate pronoun – its, it  | Conjunctions – but, and, nor, or, yet   |
| Modifiers/Quantifiers –two feet high/long/tall, one, two, more, some | Modal auxiliary verbs – can, could, should, shall, may, might                     |
| Other words – around, what, are, as, said                            | Other words – will, rather, be, such, must, too, certain, extremely, very, enough |

Figure 1 Gender Indicators Checklist

Argamon et al state that even in formal writing, female writers exhibit greater usage of features which have been identified as “informational”. Ball identified some other feminine keywords such as: with, if, not, where, be, should. Some other masculine words according to him include: around, what, are, as, it, said. Language tends to reflect gender in very subtle ways.

According to Argamon et al, pronouns send the message that the identity of the “thing” involved is known to the reader, specifiers provide information about “things” that the writer assumes the reader knows. Thus, one main difference between men’s and women’s writing, they posit, is the way the

people, objects, collectives and institutions are presented (4). The study sets out to determine this using ESL essay texts of undergraduates.

**Research Design and Methodology**

Research design is the structuring of investigation aimed at identifying variables and their relationships to one another (Asika 27). The design that was adopted in this study is the descriptive survey design which uses results from samples to generalise the entire population. Descriptive research, according to Anaeke, is concerned with the collection of data for the purpose of describing and interpreting existing conditions on practices, beliefs, attitudes etc (34). The purpose of the descriptive research which the researchers adopted in this study “is to describe systematically the facts, qualities or characteristics of a given population, event or area of interest concerning the problem under investigation”, (Anaeke 34). To examine if gender can be differentiated in the written essays of ESL learners, the research adopted a quantitative and qualitative approach in the discussion and interpretation of the data.

**Procedure for Data Collection**

The approach that was adopted in the collection of data is the cross-sectional approach which is an explanatory design that makes it easy for collection of data from a large number of subjects, thereby, providing information with which to investigate patterns of language use. In this study, Text Elicitation Exercise (TEE) was carried out on the study population of final year students of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Five faculties were selected randomly for this study and one department from each faculty was purposefully selected. The number of sample was also purposefully selected from each department. This is shown in the table form below:

| <b>FACULTY</b> | <b>DEPARTMENT</b> | <b>NUMBER<br/>SELECTED</b> |
|----------------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| ARTS           | ENGLISH & LIT. S  | 40                         |

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|                |                |    |
|----------------|----------------|----|
| BIOLOGICAL SC. | MICROBIOLOGY   | 40 |
| EDUCATION      | VOC. TCHR EDU. | 40 |
| PHYSICAL SC.   | PHYSICS &ASTRO | 40 |
| SOCIAL SCIENCE | POLITICAL SC.  | 40 |

Figure 2: Population for the study:

The students were taken to a hall and given numbered answer sheets where they wrote on the essay topic given to them in order to elicit the appropriate responses. The sample population were also given a separate paper with a corresponding number and were asked to write their names and gender on it. Their names and gender did not appear on the answer sheet for the sake of determining gender difference. One hour (1hr) was given for the writing and a minimum of four (400) words were required. The instrument for the study was administered by the researcher with the help of the lecturer in charge of the students for the periods used to administer the test.

### **Method of Data Analysis**

The study which consisted of two hundred (200) texts collected from the study population was analyzed. There were about four hundred (400) words in each text which gave 80,000 words. The data obtained were analysed for cohesion, interlanguage and emergent texture using Gutwinski's pattern of analysing cohesion in English. The data was also used to determine if gender has any influence on cohesion of written texts. Here, the sentence was used as the basic unit of analysis, where a sentence is used to refer to a unit of meaning in a written prose, which begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop, (Nwogu cited in Malgwi 83). The sentences in the texts were numbered serially from the first to the last. A tabular representation was made of the gender terms identified in each interlanguage text. Information contained in the table includes sentence number and certain words that appear in the sample texts that distinguish gender. These were classified as:

number of texts and words that distinguish gender: terms used more by males and terms used more females.

### **Data Presentation, Analysis, and Results:**

For the purpose of this study, in order to conserve space, the researchers will only present the tables which showed the overall analysis of the texts. The texts are numbered 1-200.

**Table 1 Summary of Terms in the Sample Texts that indicate Gender**

| <b>Text No</b> | <b>No of Terms used more by Males</b> | <b>No of Terms used more by Females</b> | <b>Presumed Gender Writer</b> | <b>Actual Gender Writer</b> |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1              | 68                                    | 96                                      | F                             | F                           |
| 2              | 61                                    | 39                                      | M                             | F                           |
| 3              | 81                                    | 52                                      | M                             | F                           |
| 4              | 111                                   | 52                                      | M                             | F                           |
| 5              | 92                                    | 69                                      | M                             | F                           |
| 6              | 84                                    | 77                                      | M                             | F                           |
| 7              | 100                                   | 74                                      | M                             | F                           |
| 8              | 84                                    | 61                                      | M                             | M                           |
| 9              | 74                                    | 57                                      | M                             | M                           |
| 10             | 61                                    | 60                                      | M                             | F                           |
| 11             | 32                                    | 43                                      | F                             | F                           |
| 12             | 96                                    | 53                                      | M                             | F                           |
| 13             | 79                                    | 54                                      | M                             | F                           |
| 14             | 56                                    | 59                                      | F                             | F                           |
| 15             | 80                                    | 54                                      | M                             | F                           |
| 16             | 78                                    | 54                                      | M                             | F                           |
| 17             | 88                                    | 54                                      | M                             | M                           |
| 18             | 66                                    | 33                                      | M                             | F                           |
| 19             | 66                                    | 49                                      | M                             | F                           |



|    |     |     |   |   |
|----|-----|-----|---|---|
| 20 | 32  | 24  | M | F |
| 21 | 48  | 47  | M | F |
| 22 | 71  | 80  | F | F |
| 23 | 101 | 67  | M | F |
| 24 | 32  | 25  | M | F |
| 25 | 76  | 47  | M | F |
| 26 | 28  | 31  | F | F |
| 27 | 128 | 60  | M | F |
| 28 | 58  | 30  | M | F |
| 29 | 62  | 52  | M | F |
| 30 | 96  | 65  | M | F |
| 31 | 80  | 108 | F | F |
| 32 | 114 | 91  | M | M |
| 33 | 48  | 48  | E | F |
| 34 | 88  | 78  | M | F |
| 35 | 60  | 49  | M | F |
| 36 | 73  | 48  | M | F |
| 37 | 92  | 81  | M | F |
| 38 | 47  | 54  | F | M |
| 39 | 66  | 41  | M | M |
| 40 | 83  | 56  | M | M |
| 41 | 37  | 31  | M | M |
| 42 | 70  | 76  | F | M |
| 43 | 128 | 64  | M | M |
| 44 | 99  | 65  | M | M |
| 45 | 51  | 58  | F | F |
| 46 | 67  | 66  | M | F |
| 47 | 72  | 60  | M | F |
| 48 | 101 | 82  | M | F |
| 49 | 62  | 70  | F | M |
| 50 | 68  | 81  | F | M |
| 51 | 23  | 19  | M | M |

|    |    |    |   |   |
|----|----|----|---|---|
| 52 | 31 | 26 | M | F |
| 53 | 34 | 32 | M | F |
| 54 | 49 | 46 | M | M |
| 55 | 36 | 33 | M | M |
| 56 | 38 | 48 | F | M |
| 57 | 17 | 24 | F | M |
| 58 | 71 | 60 | M | M |
| 59 | 78 | 58 | M | M |
| 60 | 80 | 88 | F | M |
| 61 | 57 | 50 | M | F |
| 62 | 17 | 19 | F | F |
| 63 | 75 | 69 | M | F |
| 64 | 68 | 52 | M | F |
| 65 | 59 | 61 | F | F |
| 66 | 73 | 90 | F | F |
| 67 | 64 | 57 | M | F |
| 68 | 51 | 28 | M | M |
| 69 | 71 | 86 | F | M |
| 70 | 53 | 77 | F | F |
| 71 | 73 | 64 | M | M |
| 72 | 76 | 85 | F | M |
| 73 | 70 | 57 | M | M |
| 74 | 49 | 36 | M | M |
| 75 | 87 | 81 | M | M |
| 76 | 72 | 51 | M | F |
| 77 | 49 | 31 | M | F |
| 78 | 61 | 69 | F | M |
| 79 | 15 | 21 | F | M |
| 80 | 64 | 52 | M | M |
| 81 | 55 | 52 | M | F |
| 82 | 71 | 71 | E | F |
| 83 | 59 | 44 | M | F |

|     |     |     |   |   |
|-----|-----|-----|---|---|
| 84  | 42  | 29  | M | F |
| 85  | 44  | 50  | F | M |
| 86  | 47  | 57  | F | M |
| 87  | 70  | 75  | F | F |
| 88  | 30  | 30  | E | F |
| 89  | 32  | 45  | F | M |
| 90  | 44  | 39  | M | F |
| 91  | 109 | 102 | M | F |
| 92  | 33  | 32  | M | F |
| 93  | 58  | 48  | M | F |
| 94  | 36  | 49  | F | F |
| 95  | 57  | 73  | F | M |
| 96  | 28  | 76  | F | F |
| 97  | 50  | 43  | M | F |
| 98  | 32  | 22  | M | M |
| 99  | 42  | 46  | F | F |
| 100 | 65  | 39  | M | M |
| 101 | 39  | 49  | F | M |
| 102 | 51  | 62  | F | F |
| 103 | 47  | 36  | M | M |
| 104 | 51  | 46  | M | M |
| 105 | 37  | 47  | F | F |
| 106 | 52  | 50  | M | M |
| 107 | 40  | 35  | M | M |
| 108 | 24  | 30  | F | M |
| 109 | 28  | 32  | F | M |
| 110 | 38  | 34  | M | M |
| 111 | 44  | 22  | M | M |
| 112 | 56  | 45  | M | F |
| 113 | 33  | 46  | F | F |
| 114 | 33  | 38  | F | M |
| 115 | 46  | 74  | F | F |

|     |     |    |   |   |
|-----|-----|----|---|---|
| 116 | 47  | 34 | M | M |
| 117 | 66  | 47 | M | F |
| 118 | 28  | 33 | F | M |
| 119 | 54  | 79 | F | M |
| 120 | 18  | 20 | F | F |
| 121 | 87  | 81 | M | M |
| 122 | 48  | 34 | M | M |
| 123 | 62  | 82 | F | M |
| 124 | 40  | 36 | M | F |
| 125 | 52  | 41 | M | M |
| 126 | 29  | 12 | M | M |
| 127 | 64  | 45 | M | M |
| 128 | 109 | 71 | M | F |
| 129 | 42  | 51 | F | M |
| 130 | 56  | 57 | F | M |
| 131 | 72  | 50 | M | F |
| 132 | 53  | 38 | M | M |
| 133 | 80  | 52 | M | F |
| 134 | 44  | 32 | M | M |
| 135 | 35  | 24 | M | F |
| 136 | 49  | 42 | M | M |
| 137 | 36  | 44 | F | M |
| 138 | 24  | 15 | F | F |
| 139 | 94  | 90 | M | M |
| 140 | 52  | 34 | M | M |
| 141 | 44  | 20 | M | M |
| 142 | 37  | 54 | F | M |
| 143 | 38  | 35 | M | M |
| 144 | 38  | 31 | M | M |
| 145 | 39  | 36 | M | M |

|     |     |    |   |   |
|-----|-----|----|---|---|
| 146 | 47  | 41 | M | M |
| 147 | 42  | 42 | E | M |
| 148 | 79  | 40 | M | M |
| 149 | 28  | 38 | F | M |
| 150 | 71  | 47 | M | M |
| 151 | 45  | 21 | M | M |
| 152 | 58  | 35 | M | M |
| 153 | 27  | 35 | F | M |
| 154 | 31  | 29 | M | M |
| 155 | 31  | 29 | M | M |
| 156 | 81  | 61 | M | M |
| 157 | 42  | 41 | M | M |
| 158 | 55  | 41 | M | M |
| 159 | 38  | 56 | F | M |
| 160 | 41  | 28 | M | M |
| 161 | 40  | 30 | M | M |
| 162 | 76  | 53 | M | M |
| 163 | 106 | 80 | M | M |
| 164 | 45  | 57 | F | F |
| 165 | 94  | 70 | M | M |
| 166 | 65  | 60 | M | M |
| 167 | 30  | 40 | F | M |
| 168 | 31  | 34 | F | M |
| 169 | 42  | 32 | M | M |
| 170 | 54  | 62 | F | M |
| 171 | 34  | 36 | F | F |
| 172 | 65  | 70 | F | M |
| 173 | 58  | 62 | F | M |
| 174 | 125 | 95 | M | M |
| 175 | 38  | 36 | M | M |
| 176 | 57  | 57 | M | M |
| 177 | 53  | 43 | E | F |

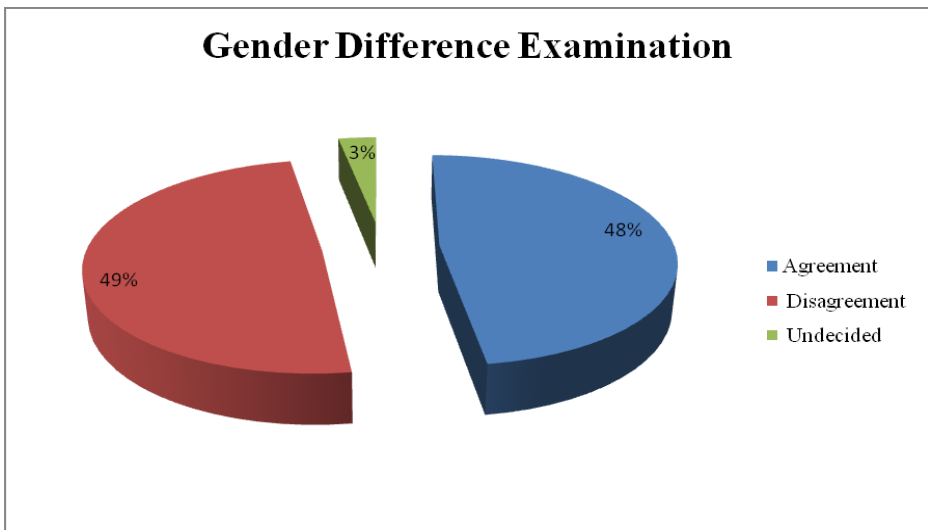
|     |     |     |   |   |
|-----|-----|-----|---|---|
| 178 | 55  | 33  | M | M |
| 179 | 52  | 37  | M | M |
| 180 | 71  | 63  | M | M |
| 181 | 109 | 94  | M | M |
| 182 | 91  | 50  | M | M |
| 183 | 30  | 32  | F | F |
| 184 | 51  | 108 | F | F |
| 185 | 73  | 39  | M | F |
| 186 | 88  | 53  | M | F |
| 187 | 52  | 35  | M | F |
| 188 | 105 | 55  | M | F |
| 189 | 53  | 27  | M | F |
| 190 | 78  | 54  | M | F |
| 191 | 52  | 43  | M | M |
| 192 | 43  | 47  | F | M |
| 193 | 46  | 36  | M | F |
| 194 | 31  | 24  | M | F |
| 195 | 47  | 27  | M | M |
| 196 | 78  | 72  | M | F |
| 197 | 38  | 36  | M | F |
| 198 | 86  | 74  | M | F |
| 199 | 79  | 51  | M | F |
| 200 | 88  | 88  | E | F |

Where M = Male, F = Female E = Either, PGW = Presumed Gender Writer, AGW = Actual Gender Writer.

This table summarizes the overall gender differences in the selected LIWC categories.

**Table 2** Frequencies of the Level of Agreement to Gender Determination in Writing Decision

|       |              | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|--------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Agreement    | 95        | 47.5    | 47.5          | 47.5               |
|       | Disagreement | 99        | 49.5    | 49.5          | 97.0               |
|       | Undecided    | 6         | 3.0     | 3.0           | 100.0              |
|       | Total        | 200       | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |



**Figure 3:** Gender differences in the sample texts

The results show the level of agreement, disagreement, and undecided on the issue of gender difference.

**Discussions**

The results show the level of agreement, disagreement, and undecided on the issue of determining gender difference in writing. The frequency in the determination of gender difference in writing as the results show from the analysis is that 47.5% agree to the gender difference, 49.5% disagree with the

gender difference while 3.0% are undecided. The gender difference examinations show 48% agreement, 49% disagreement and 3% undecided. This shows that in English as a Second Language, there is no gender difference in writing. We cannot differentiate a male writer from a female writer.

This study agrees with the research conducted by Meihof cited by Waskita on adult writing which found that male and female students wrote similar kind of texts. And also agree with a research conducted by Vali and Kiahiparsa (web) on gender differences in using cohesive devices while writing which showed that there is no gender difference in using cohesive devices while writing in English.

### **Conclusion**

The gender difference as the result showed is 48% agreement, 49% disagreement and 3% undecided. The result showed that observed agreement is 95% and observed disagreement is 99%. Therefore, based on the findings of this study, we came to a conclusion that there is no gender difference in ESL writing.



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