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Gender-Fair Language In Study Guides: Advancing Literacy For Inclusive Pedagogical Practices

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Abstract: This study investigates the presence and patterns of gender representation in study guides at Pangasinan State University (PSU), with the goal of enhancing inclusive literacy through gender-fair language. Using qualitative content analysis, the research uncovers persistent gender biases, such as the dominant use of masculine pronouns and terminology that reinforce stereotypes and marginalize other gender identities. The findings underscore the need for inclusive linguistic practices, particularly through neutralization and feminization strategies—such as replacing masculine generics with gender-neutral alternatives. The study emphasizes the role of language in forming societal attitudes and perceptions. The use of inclusive terminology, avoidance of sexist representations, and alignment with modern communication standards are essential in advancing equitable and inclusive learning environments. By adopting gender-fair strategies, academic communication can better reflect the values of diversity and equality in a globalized world.

Keywords: feminization, neutralization, inclusivity

INTRODUCTION

The message of UNESCO about gender equality is clear: women and men must enjoy equal opportunities, choices, capabilities, power and knowledge as equal citizens. It implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, thereby recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men. The United Nations says that besides being a fundamental human right, gender equality is essential to achieve peaceful societies, with full human potential and sustainable development.

There are a lot of ways to promote gender equality in life. One is using gender-fair language. Gender-fair language (GFL) aims at reducing gender stereotyping and discrimination. It is a non-sexist language that avoids bias toward a particular sex or gender and therefore is less likely to convey stereotypes. According to DFA Gender and Development Unit, using non-sexist language promotes gender-sensitivity, articulates consciousness, affects socialization and reflects culture.

Two principle strategies have been employed to make languages gender-fair and to treat women and men symmetrically: neutralization and feminization. Neutralization is achieved, for example, by replacing male-masculine forms (policeman) with gender-unmarked forms (police officer), whereas feminization relies on the use of feminine forms to make female referents visible (i.e., the applicant… he or she instead of the applicant… he). Linguistic gender asymmetries are ubiquitous, as documented in the contributions in Hellinger and Bußmann (2001, 2002, 2003), which analyze 30 languages (e.g., Arabic, Chinese, English, Finnish, Hindi, Turkish, Swahili) from various language families. An

almost universal and fundamental asymmetry lies in the use of masculine generics. In English, for example, generic he can be used when gender is irrelevant (e.g., the user… he) and in German, masculine role nouns serve as labels for mixed gender groups (e.g., einige Lehrer, masc.pl 'several teachers' for a group of male and female teachers). Thus, masculine forms not only designate men but also mixed-gender groups or referents whose gender is unknown or unspecified (see Stahlberg et al., 2007). Feminine forms, on the other hand, do not function generically but refer to women only (Hellinger and Bußmann, 2001). That masculine forms are used to represent all human beings is in accord with the traditional gender hierarchy, which grants men more power and higher social status than women (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004).

The use of generic masculine terms to refer to both sexes has been a long-held norm and practice that renders women invisible and could result to the non-consideration of their needs and concerns in all aspects. That is why higher authorities have been addressing the concerns from then on. And one of the ways is to implement regulating rules such as the CSC Memorandum Circular No. 12, s. 2005, issued on March 30, 2005, encouraging government officials and employees to use non-sexist language in all its official documents, issuances and communications. The CSC has suggested some ways to practice gender-neutral language through the elimination of the following: generic use of pronouns such as he, his or him, unless the antecedent is obviously male; generic use of man and instead use people, persons(s), human, human beings, humankind, humanity, human race etc.; sexism in symbolic representations of gender in words, sentences and texts; and sexual stereotyping of roles. This gender-fair language-related memorandum has long been existing before it was acknowledged.

Educational institutions normalize gender standards that are often transferred to one's home and work culture (McCowan, 2012), making the assessment of cultures fostered in IHEs imperative to the study of gender equality. In recent years, gender-fair language practices in educational institutions have been discussed and studied in the Philippines. The research focus on instructional materials or academic-related materials such as books and the like.

In the local context, the researcher of this study seeks to identify the current state of gender representation in the study guides at Pangasinan State University and propose innovative strategies to promote inclusivity and equality. By examining language patterns and biases, this study endeavors to contribute novel insights into the development of gender-neutral and inclusive educational resources.

METHOD

Research design

This study employed qualitative content analysis, a method that allows for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through a systematic process of coding and theme identification. In particular, the study utilized a directed approach to content analysis, as outlined by Hsiu and Shannon (2005). This approach begins with existing theory or prior research to inform the initial coding categories. In the context of this research, the guiding theoretical concepts are neutralization and feminization in language use, both of which are central to the examination of gender-fair language.

The purpose of this methodological approach is to explore how gender-fair language is represented, practiced, and potentially normalized in educational materials, specifically study guides. The

directed content analysis framework facilitates the identification of both explicit and implicit patterns that relate to inclusivity in pedagogical language.

Corpus of Data

The corpus of data consists of selected study guides used in the tertiary-level of education's institution, Pangasinan State University. The selection criteria included: 1) Study guides published or used between 2020 and 2024; and 2) Accessibility in digital or printed form for documentation and analysis. Each study guide was examined for linguistic features aligned with gender-fair language, focusing on forms of neutralization (e.g., generic terms, gender-neutral pronouns) and feminization (e.g., inclusion of feminine forms or dual-gender references).

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards, ensuring that all institutional and data-related protocols were followed. Permissions were sought from the authors of the study guides to use their instructional content for academic purposes.

The anonymity of authors of the study guides was preserved by removing identifiable information in the analysis and reporting. Moreover, the researcher maintained academic integrity by properly attributing all theoretical sources and respecting the intellectual property of the materials analyzed.

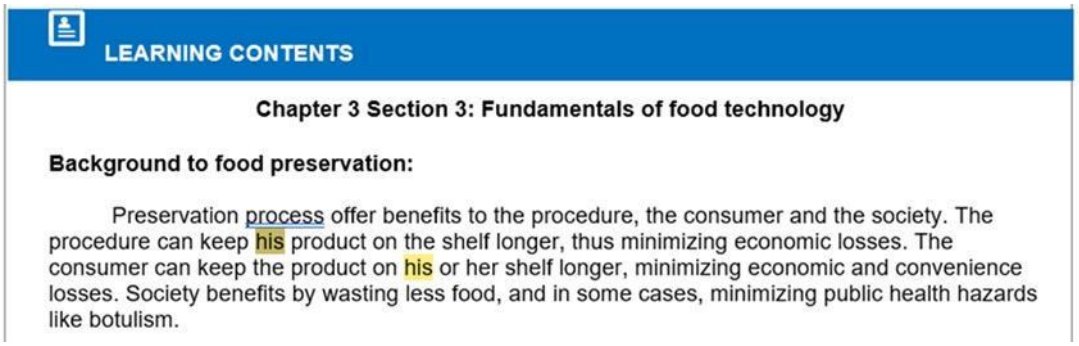
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of study guides revealed multiple occurrences where gendered language persisted, often in conflict with established gender-sensitive communication standards. The findings are categorized into two major themes: persistence of generic masculine pronouns and use of gendered terms like "man" and "man-made"

1. **Persistence of Generic Masculine Pronouns**

A recurring pattern across the corpus was the generic use of masculine pronouns, such as he, his, or him, even when referring to individuals of unspecified or universal gender. This linguistic feature is considered a form of sexist language because it reinforces implicit gender biases. A sample is shown below.

Picture 1. Part of a Study Guide with Generic Masculine Pronouns


LEARNING CONTENTS

Chapter 3 Section 3: Fundamentals of food technology

Background to food preservation:

Preservation process offer benefits to the procedure, the consumer and the society. The procedure can keep his product on the shelf longer, thus minimizing economic losses. The consumer can keep the product on his or her shelf longer, minimizing economic and convenience losses. Society benefits by wasting less food, and in some cases, minimizing public health hazards like botulism.

The passage illustrates an example of gendered language that may undermine the inclusive intent of educational material. The phrase: “The procedure can keep his product on the shelf longer...” uses the generic masculine pronoun “his” when referring to an unspecified consumer. Although the second sentence attempts a more inclusive structure—“his or her shelf longer”—the initial usage of “his” still reflects a non-gender-fair construction.

Four key issues were identified across similar samples.

a. Exclusion of Other Genders

The exclusive use of "his" as a default pronoun marginalizes non-male identities. It creates a linguistic environment where male is treated as the norm, subtly excluding individuals who identify outside the male gender. This observation aligns with the findings of Stout and Dasgupta (2011), who demonstrated that gender-exclusive language can function as a form of linguistic ostracism, diminishing the sense of inclusion among women and gender minorities in academic contexts.

b. Reinforcement of Gender Stereotypes

This usage sustains patriarchal norms by presenting the male perspective as standard or universally applicable. It contributes to the erasure of other gendered experiences, particularly in pedagogical narratives about human development or learning processes. This concern is echoed by Formanowicz et al. (2015), who found that gendered pronouns in generic contexts reinforce societal assumptions about gender roles, especially in fields like education and science.

c. Conflict with Policy Standards

The use of such language contradicts directives like the Civil Service Commission (CSC) Memorandum Circular No. 12, s. 2005, which explicitly advocates for the removal of sexist language from educational and official texts to promote gender inclusivity. Yet as Lamsal and Pant (2020) highlight, implementation of these guidelines remains uneven, suggesting a critical need for stronger policy enforcement and teacher training in gender-fair language use.

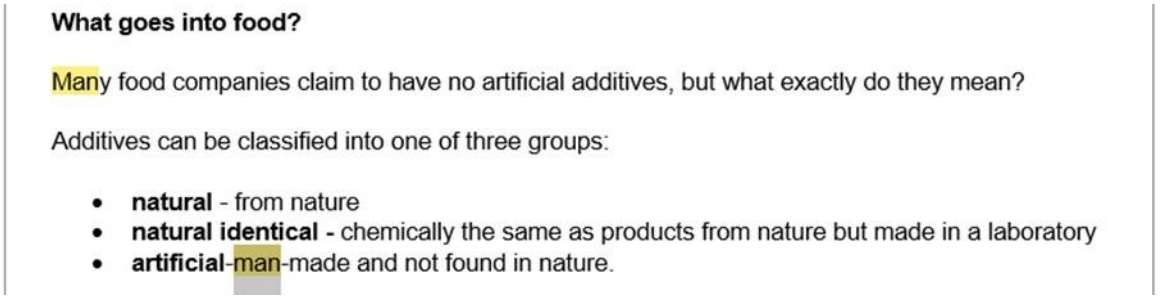
d. Language Forms Perception

Linguistic theory supports the idea that language does not merely reflect thought—it shapes it. By consistently associating functions like learning, growth, and leadership with "his" or "he," the material risks perpetuating a skewed representation of who occupies these roles in society. This notion is supported by Sczesny, Formanowicz, and Moser (2016), who emphasize that linguistic choices not only describe the world but actively shape readers’ mental models of gender and professional identity.

2. Use of Gendered Terms like "Man" and "Man-Made"

Another theme that emerged was the frequent use of gendered collective terms such as man, mankind, and man-made, rather than more inclusive alternatives. Another sample is shown below.

Picture 2. A part of a Study Guide with Gendered Terms "Man-Made"



What goes into food?

Many food companies claim to have no artificial additives, but what exactly do they mean?

Additives can be classified into one of three groups:

- **natural** - from nature
- **natural identical -** chemically the same as products from nature but made in a laboratory
- **artificial**-man-made and not found in nature.

This excerpt, taken from a study guide section titled "What goes into food?", aims to explain how food additives are classified. It presents three common categories of additives: natural, natural identical, and artificial. However, it includes the term "man-made" to describe artificial additives, which brings up a notable issue in the context of gender-fair language.

The phrase "artificial – man-made and not found in nature" reflects a form of non-inclusive terminology that implicitly associates innovation or production with masculinity. While the term man-made is historically widespread in technical and educational contexts, it has increasingly been recognized as gender-exclusive and outdated.

Alike excerpts found on the corpus on the study determines the following issues:

a. Not Inclusive Terminology

Terms like man-made were found in descriptions of processes or products (e.g., artificial additives), which can be effectively replaced with human-made or synthetically produced. This revision is supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) in its gender-fair language guidelines. These alternatives not only modernize the language but also eliminate implicit gender biases embedded in traditional phrasing.

b. Symbolic Gender Stereotypes

The persistence of terms like man-made reflects deeper symbolic biases that associate creation, authority, or innovation with masculinity. Such language can subtly encode assumptions about gender roles, particularly when used in instructional contexts. Reilly, Neumann, and Andrews (2019) point out that such symbolic exclusion can reduce students' engagement and feelings of representation, especially among female learners and those from gender-diverse backgrounds.

c. Misalignment with Contemporary Communication Standards

As noted in the DFA's communication guidelines, language is a cultural tool that both reflects and influences public consciousness. The use of inclusive terms is no longer merely stylistic; it is a communicative responsibility aligned with global efforts toward gender equity and fair representation. These standards are reinforced by Sleeter (2018), who advocates for educational materials that reflect diverse identities to create more inclusive and equitable learning spaces.

These findings have significant implications for inclusive pedagogy and literacy. Educational texts serve as more than vehicles for content delivery—they model the discursive norms that students

internalize. When study guides rely on outdated or exclusive language, they inadvertently reinforce systemic inequalities. Conversely, integrating gender-fair language promotes critical thinking, respects diversity, and helps cultivate socially aware learners.

CONCLUSION

The present study highlights the persistent use of gendered language in study guides, revealing a concerning misalignment between educational content and contemporary standards of gender-fair communication. Two dominant patterns—the use of generic masculine pronouns and gendered terms like "man" and "man-made"—demonstrate how even seemingly neutral instructional materials can subtly perpetuate gender biases. These linguistic patterns are not merely semantic concerns; they reflect and reinforce deeper sociocultural assumptions that position masculinity as the normative standard in knowledge construction, learning contexts, and innovation.

Such language not only undermines inclusivity but also directly contradicts established policy mandates such as the Civil Service Commission Memorandum Circular No. 12, s. 2005 and DFA Gender-Fair Language Guidelines, both of which advocate for the use of non-sexist and inclusive language in public and educational discourse. The examples identified in this study show how traditional phrasings like "his product" or "man-made" subtly reinforce symbolic gender hierarchies and may contribute to the marginalization of women and gender-diverse individuals within the learning environment.

Beyond compliance with policy, the pedagogical implications are profound. As educational materials serve as mirrors and molders of societal values, the continued use of exclusive language risks reproducing systemic inequities within classroom discourse and student cognition. In contrast, adopting gender-fair language fosters a learning environment that is reflective of diversity, encourages equitable participation, and aligns with global movements toward inclusive education.

Therefore, curriculum developers, educators, and institutional policymakers must take conscious steps toward revising existing materials to align with inclusive linguistic norms. This includes eliminating default masculine pronouns, replacing gendered terms with neutral alternatives, and institutionalizing training programs on gender-sensitive writing. Such reforms are critical not only to uphold educational equity but also to nurture a generation of learners who are linguistically aware, socially responsible, and prepared to thrive in a diverse world.

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