

ASSESSING STUDENTS' WILLINGNESS TO ADOPT GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IN OWERRI INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

The study investigated the willingness of Federal Polytechnic Nekede (FPNO) and Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO) students to utilize gender-inclusive language in discourse. Survey research design was adopted for the study. Four research questions were postulated based on the main objective of the study. The population consisted of one thousand seven hundred and fifty undergraduates from Federal Polytechnic, Nekede and Federal University of Technology, Owerri (Five hundred HND2 students of Vocational Studies of Federal Polytechnic, Nekede, and One thousand two hundred and fifty, final year Engineering students of Federal University of Technology Owerri). A Random sampling technique was used to select one hundred and seventy and two hundred respondents from FPNO and FUTO respectively. The instrument used for the collection of data was a four point Likert scale rating questionnaire alongside recorded conversation from the students. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (Mean, Standard Deviation and Simple Percentages), represented on tables and graph in SPSS Package. Results showed lesser utilization of gender-inclusive language in conversation by the male dominated Engineering students and more unwillingness to adopt inclusive language as against the female dominated Vocational studies department. The study recommended a review of the curriculum to be more gender sensitive and concerted efforts at creating more awareness of gender inclusive language especially in TVET institutions in Africa.

Key words: “Willingness” “Language” “Gender-Inclusive” “Discourse”

1.0 Introduction

Language as a powerful tool of communication is by no means neutral. It influences our interactions, and shapes the world around us, reflecting and preserving values and prejudices of the society. Language is an essential communication tool for expressing ourselves and interacting with the world around us [1]. We can use language to rate an issue highly or lowly, depending on how we feel about it. Similarly, it communicates positively and negatively about the sexes, playing a crucial role in molding linguistic behavior and gender perception [2]. According to the United Nations Women's Gender Terms, language helps in shaping cultural and social attitudes [3]. We therefore use language to tell people how we feel about them either directly or indirectly. The patrilineal nature of many African societies reflects in the daily use of language, many, to the exclusion of women which had been the practice for a long while. [4] observed that language can be used to perpetuate inequality and injustice. This is the basis of the social problem that people are fighting against. The bias through stereotyping tends to dehumanize both sexes. Noting the ability of

language, to create barriers or dismantle mountains, the United Nations seeks the use of gender-neutral language in communication to dismantle these obstacles that form barriers and relegate women to the background. United Nations System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity describes gender-inclusive language as “... means of speaking and writing in a way that does not discriminate against a particular sex, social gender or gender identity, and does not perpetuate gender stereotypes” [5]. Inclusive language therefore is a set of communication practices that aim to avoid stereotypes, assumptions, and biases based on a person’s sex or disability. It is all about recognizing and respecting the diversity of human experiences and not excluding anyone in communication or other spheres of life.

Languages change and adapt to the new reality and needs of the communities that use them. Only dead languages seem immutable. Sociolinguistics studies language in social context, being concerned with how human relationships affect language and the variations that emanate therefrom due to situational and societal influences [6]. Language evolution as a sociolinguistic phenomenon involves the inclusion of new words and phrases to a particular language. It assesses how such new entrants convey messages and ideas in the language [7]. Such inclusions that bring about language variations do not often go without resistance. As [8] explains, language education is a key agent in the spread of change resulting from linguistic reform, so it is important for schools to be involved in this tidal change. Some societies have joined the wave of change by introducing gender neutral words to their vocabulary. The English language as a living mechanism is also responding to the wave of change. The issues of inequality keep resonating and no meaningful development will take place without these issues being tackled. In keeping with ATUPA’s mandate to tackle issues of innovation and inequality, the study assessed the willingness of students in TVET institutions to utilize such innovative gender-inclusive words to provide a more welcoming and conducive learning environments for both genders.

Communication being essential to humans utilizes language as its vehicle. Language is the basis of our identity. In a dynamic way, languages keep evolving, communicating new ideas. Through this medium, we learn the message of our past and what the present serves us which is insightful for the future. Observably, people in societies communicate differently. Africans are not different. Research has shown that women are mindful in their choice of words because they have the intension to achieve social harmony, connections and relationships in communication while men use language to enhance social dominance [9].

Studies have also shown language to be one of the instruments of female oppression by males. As a matter of fact, language does not only reflect a patriarchal system but also emphasizes male supremacy over women. As shown in [10] analyzing mostly male language production. This lop-sided linguistic situation has led to linguistic imbalance. Language thus becomes sexist on accounts of consciously or unconsciously assuming certain traits, professions, and occupations in association to a particular gender thus making these attributes gender exclusive, leading to linguistic inequality which is basically the ideological valuing of some features of language over others.

Gender is a social construction of roles and responsibilities to women and men in a given culture. Gender roles as a societal construct differ depending on the society [11]. Gender and its related concepts shape the roles that men and women play in societies. Nigeria, for an instance, still dwells in its patriarchal nature, reflecting in the linguistic behaviors of the male folks. According to [12], gender-inclusive language refers to the oral and written language that are non-discriminatory towards “a particular sex, social gender or gender identity”, and that avoids preserving gender stereotypes, with stereotyping being a culture-wide beliefs about how men and women differ in personal qualities and characteristics [13] (Haslett, Geis and Carter1992). Given the key role of language in shaping cultural and social attitudes, using gender-inclusive language is a powerful way to promote gender equality and eradicate gender bias. It helps to foster a sense of belonging and empower individuals to bring their unique perspectives to the table.

[14] defines discourse as “... formal, orderly and usually extended expression of thoughts on a subject”. It involves the use of language to convey information. The manner in which we use language shapes our thinking and by implication, our reality. The use of language sometimes privileges some frame of thinking about things while marginalizing others. Our values and cultures are often transmitted to the next generation through our institutions of learning. School mirrors today’s society, it is a representation of the world we live in. The values needed to coexist are often transmitted to kids in schools [15]. ATUPA being passionate about innovative practices geared towards revolutionizing technical education in Africa needs to address issues on gender, especially on language inclusivity and parity.

Willingness describes the condition or attribute of being ready, eager, or inclined to do action. It suggests a readiness to participate in an activity or to accept a circumstance. A

multitude of elements, including motivation, desire, intention, and consent, are frequently combined to determine willingness. The state of being willing suggests that a person is acting freely, free from outside pressure or compulsion. It entails having the ability to make decisions freely and independently, in this case, the person must be ready and enthusiastic about it. Willingness is a critical factor in determining an individual's conduct and the results of a group in a variety of circumstances, including relationships, the workplace, education, and civic involvement. It is frequently seen as a favorable quality connected to collaboration, creativity, and personal development. In this regard, willingness entails being prepared to modify, give in, or give up something in order to advance the larger good. Willingness to learn entails making concerted efforts to learn. It is a process when someone makes a choice, whether to follow up on their motivation to learn [16] TVET students' willingness to learn can be influenced by different factors such as the psychological state or motivation from the teacher where they show the desire to try out novel ideas [17].

Studies have shown the exclusion of some other persons through language. Language stereotypes women and sometimes men. For an instance, our traditional titles of address do not differentiate males by marital status (Mr.) but differentiates females as (Miss, Mrs.), indicating a difference in our perception of the importance of that status in the two sexes. In a study on content analysis of sexist language occurrence in students' written discourse, [18] discovered incidences of sexist language in students' discourse. They also pointed out that while English is the most commonly used foreign language in the world, it is imperative for language users to be responsive to gender-based languages. [19] studied the use of the gender-unfair language, especially while referring to those of masculine generics, which have restricted the visibility of women as well as the cognitive availability of female exemplars as stated by [20]. The Gender-fair language (GFL) or gender-neutral language targets to reduce gender stereotyping and gender discrimination. The literature discussed how communication, at all levels is one sided. Emanating from the above. Scholars have sought ways to use language that is neither derogatory nor stereotypes for both sexes as shown in gender-inclusive language.

The study is hinged on the feminist approach which values diversity and inclusion as essential assets for achieving transformative change and sustainable development. Feminist theory encompasses a range of ideas, reflecting the diversity of women worldwide. It counters traditional philosophy with new ways of addressing issues affecting humanity,

calling for the replacement of the presiding patriarchal order with a system that emphasizes equal rights, justice, and fairness. The study is hinged on Liberal Feminism [21]. Liberal feminism is a gradualist approach to improving the position of women in society by promoting equal opportunity through legislation while, at the same time, challenging the socialization process that accepts gender inequality. Feminism as an ideological concept, designates the point of view that women's rights and opportunities have been constrained by social systems designed to be more advantageous to men. It is in recognition of this agitation that the United Nations has recognized the need for inclusivity in all areas of life, language inclusive. This aims to eliminate all manners of speech that tends to negate women.

2.0. Objective

Language structure and use can promote or hinder gender inclusivity. Sexist language is dehumanizing and often leads to stereotyping, bringing about low self-esteem. Taking into cognizance the patrilineal nature of the continent, the study sought to establish the willingness of Nigeria's TVET students to imbibe the language of gender-inclusivity in their various discourses.

3.0 Materials and Methods

The study investigated the willingness of Federal Polytechnic Nekede (FPNO) and Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO) students to utilize gender-inclusive language in discourse. Survey research design was adopted for the study. Four research questions were postulated based on the main objective of the study. The population consisted of one thousand seven hundred and fifty undergraduates from Federal Polytechnic, Nekede and Federal University of Technology, Owerri (Five hundred HND2 students of Vocational Studies of FPNO, and one thousand two hundred and fifty, final year Engineering students of FUTO). A Random sampling technique was used to select one hundred and seventy and two hundred respondents from FPNO and FUTO respectively. The instrument used for the collection of data was a four-point Likert scale rating questionnaire alongside the recorded conversations from the students. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (Mean, Standard Deviation and Simple Percentages), represented on tables and graph in SPSS Package.

4.0 Results

Table 1: Distribution of Students according to Gender

	Frequency	Percentage
Federal University of Tech. Owerri		
Males	160	80
Females	40	20
Total	200	100
Federal Polytechnic, Nekede, Owerri		
Males	50	29.44
Females	120	70.56
Total	170	100
Grand Total	370	100

Table 1 shows the distribution of students according to gender. 80% of the Engineering students were shown to be males revealing a male dominated discipline. On the other hand, the Vocational Studies Department showed a 70.56% female dominance. Their gender is important in considering their reactions to the issue at hand.

Fig. 1. shows the students' level of awareness of Gender-inclusivity in discourse. Mean ratings of 3.39, 3.32, and 3.34 each indicates a Very Great Extent of awareness. In effect, they are aware of the effect of language choices in a conversation. A mean rating of 2.69 and 2.63 respectively show an awareness of the existence of gender-inclusive language which in turn, enabled the students to know that language can reinforce stereotypes in discussions. Furthermore, a mean rating of 2.08 indicates a low level of awareness of the seminars or efforts geared at propagating gender-inclusive language in the schools. Although some of the students were aware of the existence of the language of inclusivity, very marginal number have received trainings in its use. The mean of Means rating of 3.10 is an accepted value showing a great level of awareness among the students.

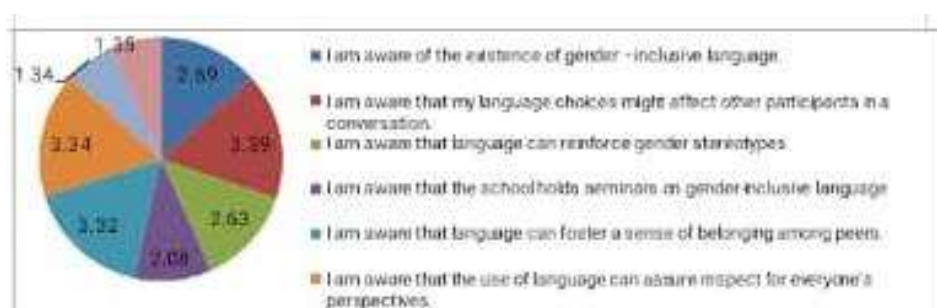


Fig. 1: Students' awareness of Gender-inclusivity in language

In respect of students' ability to identify gender inclusive sentences, a Mean of Means rating of 2.26 was rejected. Mean ratings of 1.44, 1.44, 2.02, 2.03 and 2.11 were recorded for sentences wrongly identified as gender inclusive sentences. The students showed a low of level the ability to identify sentences that were gender inclusive. For an instance, they failed to recognize the stereotype and derogatory use of marked language forms in identifying the male and female genders as indicated in item 4. They also failed to identify the use of pronoun in 'he' as a marked form because they are given to using it for male and female genders. However, they could identify items 6 as obviously marked for the masculine gender with a mean rating of 3.23.

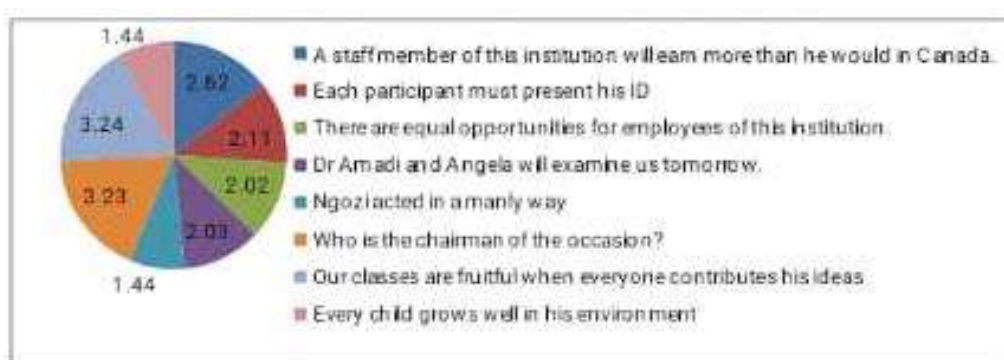


Fig. 2: Students' Identification of Gender-Inclusive Language.

A Mean rating of 1.49 each for items nos. 1 and 8 were rejected as they show very low extent of student's willingness to utilize gender-inclusive language in discourse. The students however, showed a positive disposition towards the use of some of the gender-inclusive words such as flight attendant in place of stewardess/steward and house owner in place of landlord/landlady with a rating of 3.19 each. The use of police officer in place of policeman/policewoman equally got a very great extent rating of 3.24. The Mean of Means rating of 2.35 was rejected indicating the level of resistance by the students to the use of gender -inclusive language.



Fig. 3: Students' Willingness to Utilize Gender-Inclusive Language in Discourse.

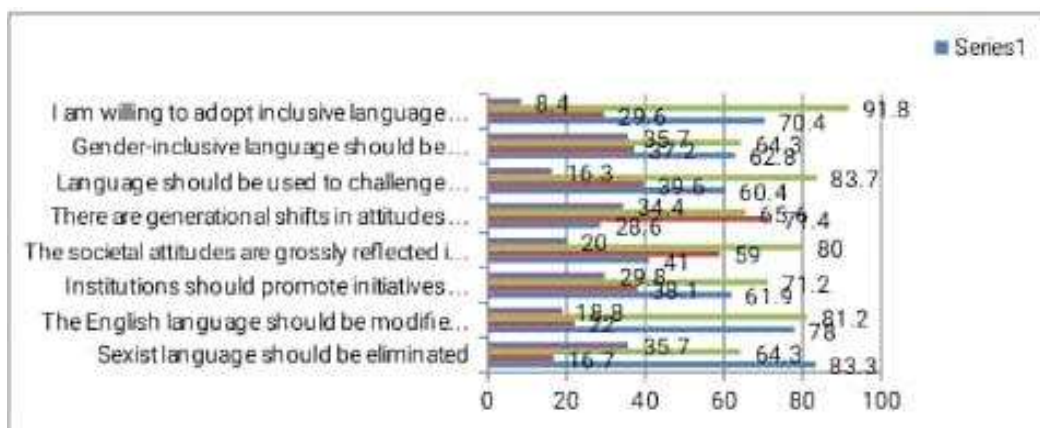


Fig. 4: Effect of Gender on Students' Attitudes Towards Gender-Inclusive Language.

Figure 4 above showed the impact of gender on students' responses. In response to the elimination of sexist language, 64,3% of the females responded in the affirmative while the males responded with a negative opinion at 83.3%. Both genders were of the opinion that societal attitudes are reflected in the use of language with a 59% response by the males and 80% response by the females. With a 78% rate of objection, the males did not feel that the English language should be modified while the females were in the affirmative with 81.2%. Furthermore, the male gender showed unwillingness for the adoption of inclusive language with 62.8% and unwillingness to use same in communication with a 70.4% whereas the females were of the view that it should be included with 64.3% and willing to utilize the language of inclusion with 91.8%

5.0 Discussions of Findings

This study is of great relevance as it has helped bring to lime light a social problem that has been existing. The school is the students' second home, where they acquire the needed knowledge for coexistence in society. It becomes imperative that students are nurtured to avoid recycling biased patterns in the society. Observably, the African society is gendered in many languages. Excerpts from the recorded conversations indicate the usage of male dominated and stereotype words by the Engineering students. This confirmed [22] work which showed that women's speech had some features that were different from men's speech. For instance, the use of language in conversation by the engineering students reinforced stereotypes about women's abilities and interests in engineering, "she is not wired for this stuff, and even when they do show up, they're usually just there for the social aspect, not the real engineering talk". Another of the students in reaction stated that "Women can't handle the hardcore discussions we have about circuit designs and programming algorithms. They always seem lost when it comes to hands-on projects. It's like they expect us to do all the heavy lifting, then they complain when they don't get equal credit". These excerpts give an inroad into the mindset of the male students suggesting that the ladies are inherently less capable, less committed, and less skilled than men. This type of language can create a hostile environment for women in engineering and contribute to the underrepresentation of women in the field. Little wonder they are resistant on the use of the language of inclusivity. A closer look at the data in Table 3 showed that the students failed to recognize the stereotype and derogatory use of marked language forms in identifying male and female. They also failed to identify the use of pronoun 'he' as a marked form because they are given to using it for male and female genders. This tendency could be seen as "identity threatening" according to [23]. This confirms students' inability to recognize the use of such language in discourse. Whereas, an inclusive language would have provided a safe environment. On the other hand, girls used language that was more accommodating. According to one of the girls, ... And it's not just welding. Look at all the girls excelling in automotive repair, plumbing, and electrical work. Exactly! We're proving that gender doesn't determine your ability to succeed in these trades. "Plus, I love how supportive our instructors are. They encourage us to push boundaries and pursue our passions without any gender bias". "Definitely. It's refreshing to be in an environment where our skills and hard work are recognized and valued". In this conversation, the language used reflects a supportive and inclusive atmosphere among female vocational students. They celebrate each other's successes, challenge stereotypes, and

emphasize the importance of breaking gender barriers in traditionally male-dominated fields. This discourse encourages empowerment, camaraderie, and equality among the students. However, [24], noted that gender neutral language will help to minimize gender discrimination and stereotyping ingrained in our culture. This accounts for the need to bring the awareness to TVET institutions. Furthermore, the only gender-neutral pronoun is “they” there leaves much work on the part of linguists to develop comprehensive lexicon that will align with the current trend of language change. Interestingly, there is a level of awareness among the students on the language of inclusivity. This can act as a pivot for African linguists to capitalize on.

6.0 Conclusions

The youths are the future of our continent hence their perspectives on certain issues are very important. It is no gain saying that the educational institutions play vital roles in language change and reformation. Noting the reluctance from the male gender in adopting certain changes, institutional attention becomes necessary if there will be a headway. Using inclusive language will ensure equity and social justice that the world has been clamoring for. This will not be achieved without concerted efforts from individuals and governments. Language, therefore, must evolve alongside other changes currently taking place in the society.

Recommendations

We need to use more inclusive language in our daily lives and by extension, in our institutions. we also need to make people aware about their usages in workplaces, educational institutions and communities if the revolutions and innovations already sweeping across nations will be felt here in Africa. While the Western world is driving home their points, African policy makers and educationists can start by updating the curriculum which appears obsolete. The onus lies on the institutions to harp on inclusivity as a safe environment will enhance learning. Greater awareness should be created to enable people to know the impact of gendered language on mental and physical health of people. Future research can comparatively study the level of acceptance of language of inclusion within TVET institutions in different regions in Africa. Further study can also be conducted on the impact of gendered language on both mental and physical health of both genders. Considering the

use of AI in many spheres of life, researches can be conducted on how to develop an Artificial Intelligence (AI) tool that can process inclusive language.

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