

Revised Research Article

An Exploration of Gender Differences in the Use of English Swearwords in Vietnam

ABSTRACT

Aims: to explore how English swearwords are used by Vietnamese female and male English learners (i) to find if there are any differences or similarities in the way both genders use English swearwords in particular circumstances; (ii) to investigate the attitude of each gender towards the use of English swearwords and their senses of politeness; (iii) to suggest the inclusion of linguistic manners and cultural perspectives regarding swearing into English teaching to prepare students for cross-cultural communication among English users in Vietnam and worldwide; (iv) to add to existing research on language education that moves beyond the gender-binary approach.

Study design: Qualitative study using questionnaires and introspection of authors' own speech and that of their acquaintances following Lakoff's theoretical framework on gender differences in English.

Place and Duration of Study: Hanoi, Vietnam, in 5 years

Methodology: Survey and introspection. 318 Vietnamese English learners (18-26 years old) participated in the survey (159 males and 159 females). Introspection includes the authors' own observations in English class within Vietnam and abroad experience of using English in Japan.

Results: Responses reveal slightly differences between male and female participants in use of English swearwords and perceptions towards swearwords. Although participants do swear quite frequently, most of them (including male and female) prefer using indirect rather than direct swearwords for politeness, to avoid hurting other feelings, or because it's just a habit that they have developed themselves through social experiences and that they have been taught by the seniors to not use direct swearwords. Either the users of indirect or direct swearwords, even in an emotional state, would first consider the surroundings and the relationship with the listeners before making decisions on their choice of swearwords. The majority of participants, regardless of gender, seem to share the same fear of being judged if they swear socially as it is an act of impoliteness, which makes them restrain themselves from swearing in public. Only a minority, disregards the judgment from the surroundings and still use swearwords to express their emotions. This is also the only gender difference trait noticed in findings that is similar with Lakoff's assumption. Which is that there are a number of men, despite the fear of being judged for swearing socially, who still do it anyway.

Conclusion: Male and female Vietnamese English learners has similar ways in the use and attitudes towards English swearwords and swearing culture which is different from previous studies of gender differences in English by Lakoff. This suggests a different approach to English education in Vietnam which emphasizes a need to include cultural studies and language manners for cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: gender differences, swearword, politeness, cross-cultural communication, English foreign language education, Vietnam

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of relations between language and gender has been strongly developed since the feminist movements in the 1970s. Realizing the power of language as not only a reflection of society but also a tool to construct it, sociolinguistic researchers consider language as a key to challenge and change male dominance (Romaine, 2000). The purposes of the study of language and gender vary. Specifically, evidence of gender discrimination and patriarchy found in language could be used to support women's liberation movements, or the understanding of genders' distinctive linguistic behaviors could support each gender in second/foreign language education, and in cross-cultural communication. Depending on these two main purposes, the study of language and gender is divided into two branches: the study of gender bias in languages (sexism in language), and the study of the differences between genders in communication patterns (gender differences in language) (Weatherall, 2005).

At the core of the study of gender differences in English, researchers focus on the questions of how, what reasons, and what motivations lead to men's and women's distinctive choices of words and ways of constructing sentences in accordance with communicating circumstances. The understanding of social and cultural factors that bear influences on gender norms which are then expressed through linguistic behaviors has contributed significantly to English language education (Mahmud & Nur, 2018; Rao, 2005; Park & French, 2013; Kobayashi, 2002). However, Maghsudi et al. (2015) emphasized that these gender differences don't necessarily mean that one gender is better at English than another, or just because one gender is more suitable with the language field the other gender should avoid it (Wightman, 2020). Rather, understanding the gender insights in each socio-cultural context would allow English teachers to develop proper engaging strategies in supporting students to harness their strengths and overcome weaknesses, consult and adjust students' expectations, attitudes, and beliefs toward English, at the same time to design syllabus and learning material for it to correspond with the gender, social and cultural contexts (Kobayashi, 2002; Daif-Allah, 2012; Sabiq et al., 2021).

Among gender patterns in the list of gender differences by the field's pioneer, Robin Lakoff, the use of English swearwords by genders was an important reflection of existing gender roles, norms and status in society. In general, swearing - a linguistic behavior that contains taboo words - has been existing in every culture all over the world for a very long time. People swear for various reasons, often related to emotions, to assert their position, or simply out of habit. Under the lens of a sociolinguist, Lakoff (1973) notices that swearwords men use tend to be more direct than swearwords that women frequently use. For instance, men tend to use very direct swearwords (fuck, shit, and damn) while women tend to use indirect ones (oh my goodness, oh dear, and oh fudge). She attributed this difference to societal expectations: women are expected to behave in a ladylike manner, which includes avoiding overt displays of anger, whereas men are permitted to express their emotions more freely. This societal double standard leads to differences in how men and women use swearwords. While Lakoff herself, as well as many other researchers, held that the claims could be applied all around the world, even with English non-native speakers; recent scholars questioned the universality and applicability of the gender pattern across the world, calling for more research base in non-Western countries.

Vietnam appears to be a suitable subject for this research. In terms of social and cultural context, although the southern part of Vietnam was once conquered by the USA, it didn't last long enough for English culture and language to have any remarkable effects on Vietnamese. Moreover, Vietnamese is a relatively gender-neutral language compared to English and other Asian languages. For example, while English often uses male pronouns (he, his, him) when referring to general people, Vietnamese uses a neutral pronoun, "them," in both English and Vietnamese contexts. This lack of gendered language in Vietnamese means there is little distinction between "men's language" and "women's language," which is significant when considering the applicability of gender differences in English to Vietnamese speakers. Moreover, Decree 37 of the Civil Law fixed in 2015 has legalized gender change in Vietnam, and officially recognized homosexuality not as a state of disease in 2015. These legal acts have contributed to the alterations of the traditional binary gender perception that has dominated Vietnam culture, stimulating social changes to adapt to the global current tendency. Given Vietnam's evolving gender norms and its neutral linguistic context, research on this topic in Vietnam could provide valuable insights into the broader applicability of gendered language patterns in English, especially in non-Western cultures.

This research aims to explore how English swearwords are used by Vietnamese female and male English learners. Specifically, the objectives are: (i) to find if there are any differences or similarities in the way both genders use English swearwords in particular circumstances; (ii) to investigate the attitude of each gender towards the use of English swearwords and their senses of politeness; (iii) to suggest the inclusion of linguistic manners and cultural perspectives regarding swearing into English teaching to prepare students for cross-cultural communication among English users in Vietnam and worldwide; (iv) to add to existing research on language education that moves beyond gender-binary approach.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Dominant Research on Gender Differences in The English Language

The study of gender differences in language were later set off into two camps, which are the dominance approach and the cultural approach.

The dominance approach of Lakoff, Freeman, and McElhinny has the tendency to criticize the unequal treatments generated by socio-cultural traditions that regard women as inferior to men eventually led to the formation of "woman's language." As such, the theory of dominance approach eventually appears to take the same path as the field of sexism in language which focuses on the disadvantages of women due to unequal power dynamics between men and women (Weatherall, 2005).

The use of English swearwords, one of the traits of gender differences noticed by scholars, has a lot to say behind the findings that men swear more often and use more direct swearwords than women. Research about the use of swearwords by two genders conducted in Sweden showed that women use fewer swearwords than men as they don't want to hurt other people's feelings and they want to be seen as a person of a higher social class than their present class (Sollid, 2008). Ella and Lucas (2019) concluded in their research, which was conducted among Filipino university students, that swearing was a male's identity and regarded as common among boys while female Filipino peers maintained the belief that they should avoid the use of swearwords. In Ireland, the frequency with which men use swearwords was recorded to be incredibly higher than women do (Schweinberger, 2018). In another research on the swearing tendency of young generations in the UK, Gauthier (2017) found out that "women do not swear more than men, nor do they use "stronger" words" (p.217). After examining a variety of existing research at the end of the 20th century, Coates

(2015), even though partially agreed with the “stereotypes of the tough-talking male and the pure, never-swearing female”, concurred with the idea that swearing and the strength of swearwords were associated with power and masculinity, not femininity, in Western culture (p.98). Such differences are explained as consequences of a “gendered culture in which the structures of masculinity and femininity are central to the formation of society as a whole” and that men and women are “trapped in gender roles” (Holmes, 2013, p. 27).

The cultural approach proposed by Maltz and Broker, Tannen, and Wardhagh still recognizes the dominance approach but further explains gender differences as the results of cultural differences based on sex separation during early childhood (Choucane, 2016). Commenting on men’s dominance in conversation, Tannen (1990) and Wardhough (2002) argue that it is not always because they do it with intention, but instead, because they were taught to speak like that to fulfill the masculine role, just as how women were taught to play their feminine role. Thus, the cultural approach doesn’t serve as a denial to the dominance approach, on the contrary, it “provides a model for explaining how dominance can be created in face-to-face interaction” (Tannen, 1994, p.10). Tannen, in her book “Gender and Conversational Interaction” (1993) has brought up a number of evidence collected from researchers, allowing audiences to have a more positive look at gender differences in linguistics choice if taking into account the goals of each gender when engaging conversation as well as the position they consider themselves at that moment. In the qualitative research on the language of men and women in the workplace in America, Basow (2008) indicates the similarities in communication style of both genders in general, yet, the differences only start to appear when it comes to specific situations (such as job applications, salary negotiations, when making decisions, handling conflicts, and working as supervisors/leaders). Ali (2009) comments that the results of gender differences are inconsistent, suggesting the inclusion of socio-cultural contexts in further studies. In this light, there is a call for research on gender differences to consider socio-cultural elements as well as the conditions under which both genders interact in analyzing linguistic behaviors (Eldelsky, 1981, as cited in Tannen, 1993).

2.1 Questions about the Universality of Gender Patterns in English and the Binary Approach

Although existing research has consolidated the differences in linguistic behaviors of genders, specifically in English, recent scholars are raising questions about the universality of these gender patterns. Ning et al. (2010) state that, as gender is constructed socially, it varies with times and societies. While agreeing on the found gender traits, Wardhaugh (2002) is well aware of the bi-directional influence in the relationship of language and culture, which means, that if one changes, so does the other. At the same time, as Tannen (1993) has commented on the cultural approach to the relationship of language and gender, that “gender is only one of many cultural factors that bears influences on linguistic behaviors” (p.5). Examining 4 studies motivated by Lakoff’s dominance approach, Svendsen (2019) also agrees with Tannen’s idea when pointing out that one of the most significant gaps in research on gender differences in English is the lack of accountability for multiple socio-cultural factors, such as ethnicity, age, and educational level. The growing popularity of Vygotsky’s theory on the significance of cultural mediation in language acquisition in research conducted by Kozulin (2004), Rublik (2017), and Pundziuvienė et al. (2023), also serves as evidence reinforcing statements regarding sociocultural impacts that closely link with the background of the students in language class. Although Lakoff (1973) states that the majority of gender difference traits in English can be applied to the majority of English speakers around the world, recent sociolinguists such as Holmes (2013) argue that “information on differences in women’s and men’s linguistic behavior in non-western cultures is a valuable check on researchers’ tendencies to over-generalize and to regard patterns

they identify as universal” (p.24). Agreeing with this, Tian (2014) conducted a study on the use of English swearwords among Chinese youths and the result is not similar to Lakoff’s assumption. The same research in an international school in Indonesia by Nicolau & Sukanto (2014) also shows that female participants employ more swearwords than male participants.

While appreciating the study of gender differences has contributed significantly to the English language education for non-native speakers, today scholars start moving towards a non-binary approach to language study. Norton and Pavlenko (2004) argue that the female/male dichotomy tends to oversimplify gender differences and ignore other sociocultural factors, the same as Tannen has mentioned as shown above, which makes it not always a relevant method in order to understand language learning outcomes. In the light of a world becoming more diverse with gender identities that can no longer be categorized in female/male binary, there is a rising demand for “gender-fair language use in all communications and teaching practices” to show respect to all gendered identities and promote inclusiveness (Peters, 2024; Peters, 2020, p.66). A non-binary gender approach in the field of language education is seen as more than important nowadays as Dev et al. (2021) have identified harms such as discrimination, misgendering, and erasure which might be initiated by the binary approach towards non-binary learners. Similar to how English speakers have trouble learning a heavily gendered language like Spanish (Diaz et al., 2022), English language learners from countries with distinctive gender norms may face challenges or even harm if English teachers apply gender binary teaching methods. Language education is for communication, and communication is about people’s identities where there are no correct or incorrect “performances of humanities” but only “honest expressions of who they are” (Griffin, 2020, p.21).

3. METHODOLOGY

Two methods are utilized in this paper, which are survey and introspection. Both followed Lakoff’s research framework on gender differences in English.

A survey is conducted using Google Forms and appeared in the English language only in order to collect the most accurate result on gender differences in the use of English swearwords in Vietnam. This survey includes: 2 cases that require participants to choose their preferred verbal choice of swearwords in specific situations, then come with one question asking for the motivations behind their choice in the respective case; and 5 questions surveying the participants’ swearing behaviors and their attitudes towards swearing norms in the society. The cases and the 4 questions are designed based on the model of gender differences in the use of English swearwords proposed by Lakoff in her work, except for the fifth question “Do you think that swearing in English rather than Vietnamese would reduce the impoliteness?” was inspired by the authors’ speculation during introspection. As the primary purpose for using Lakoff’s dominance model is to examine whether gender differences in the use of English swearwords are truly adopted by Vietnamese learners, this paper won’t develop a statistical quantitative approach from this survey but only present raw data which is classified and categorized in 2 groups based on gender. The survey was sent as a link to participants from the ages of 18 to 26. The reason for limiting the age range is that the popularity of English in education only started amplifying in 1994. Thus, participants of these ages are supposed to have been approaching English learning for at least 12 years of education, which is a sufficient amount of time for English to penetrate participants’ linguistic behaviors.

As shown in Table 1 below, there are in total of 318 Vietnamese English learners participating in the survey, and the number of male and female participants is equal. Since

the authors cooperated with Vietnamese English teachers working at Hanoi Open University of Vietnam, the majority of the participants are Vietnamese students taking English classes as a subject in their first and second year of bachelor's degree in Vietnam, ranging from students of English language majors to other non-English language majors. Only a few participants of this group (12-13%) have taken English proficiency tests (such as IELTS and TOEIC) with the level ranging from level B1-C2 among male participants, and B1-C1 among female participants. A minority of participants (less than 2%) are Vietnamese English learners studying or have studied abroad in both English and non-English-speaking countries. Most participants in this group have taken English proficiency tests before with the scores ranging from level C1-C2.

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<i>Studying/ed in Vietnam</i>	157	155
<i>Taken English proficiency tests</i>	20	19
<i>Never taken English proficiency tests</i>	137	136
<i>Studying/ed abroad</i>	2	4
<i>Taken English proficiency tests</i>	2	2
<i>Never taken English proficiency tests</i>	0	2
<i>Total</i>	159	159

Table 1: Demographic of survey's participants

The introspection includes the long-term examination of the author's speech during her years in English lessons at school in Vietnam, and later in English communication with other Vietnamese English speakers in an international environment at the university in Japan. The advantage of long-term examination is that the authors can witness the changes in her use of English swearwords following changes in socio-cultural contexts. It is the initial findings of introspection that inspired some customizations of the questionnaires used later for the survey, making the questions relatable to Vietnam's context.

4. RESULTS

The results section may be provided with a general discussion before presenting the results for each variable.

Case 1: You don't want your housemate to put bananas inside the fridge because it will make bananas spoil faster. You've told your housemate not to do this many times, but that person still forgets sometimes. One day, you got home, opened the fridge, and suddenly saw a nearly spoiled banana in the fridge. What would you say?

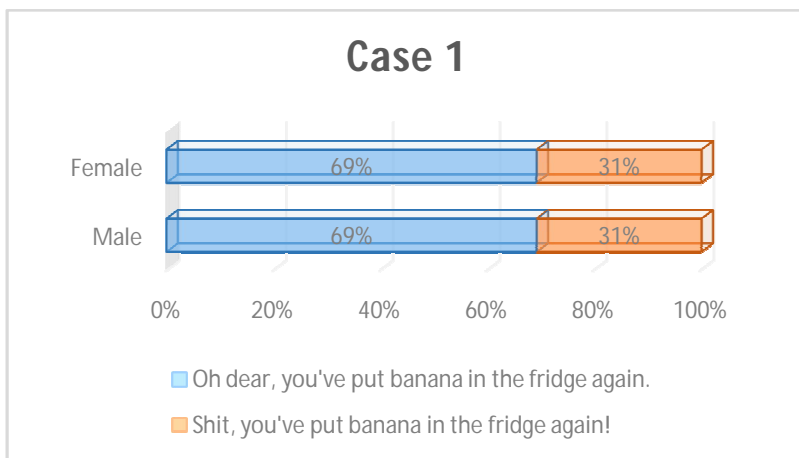


Figure 1. Case 1

Case 2: You were walking on the street. There were lots of people on the street. All of a sudden, from above, a flowerpot fell right in front of you. What would you say?

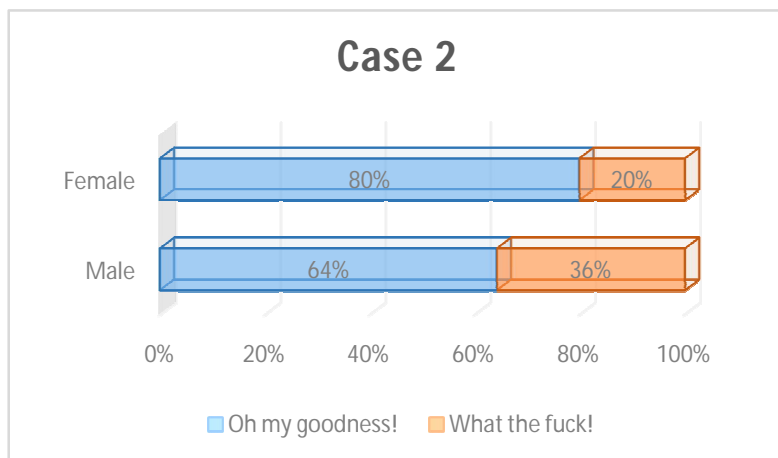


Figure 2. Case 2

Overall, the majority of participants, including men and women, use indirect swearwords (“oh dear” and “oh my goodness”) instead of direct ones (“shit” and “fuck”), which is not correlated to Lakoff’s statement. In case 1, Figure 1 shows that the proportion of females and males using “oh dear” is equal. The same happens to the proportion of females and males using “shit”. In case 2, the use of swearwords by genders changes as we witness more females choose indirect swearword - “oh my goodness” than males. The percentage difference is 16%.

As explanations for their choice of swearwords, I provided them with options to observe their behavior in using swearwords.

For Case 1:

Table 2. Explanation for the use of “Oh dear” by male and female participants

<i>Answers</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<i>Because of politeness. I don't want to hurt others' feelings.</i>	74	77
<i>Just a habit.</i>	40	32
<i>I was taught not to swear in front of other people</i>	24	20
<i>Others</i>	I'll keep the real temper in mind because in my case, with my classmate in college, I love them and we had a lot of memories, I don't want some trifles	My housemate is older than me

Table 3. Explanation for the use of “Shit” by male and female participants

<i>Answers</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<i>Just a habit.</i>	32	32
<i>I couldn't control my feelings</i>	17	21
<i>Others</i>	I and my housemate have been friends for a long time. We use swear words all the time for fun expressions. We are housemates, so we are close, and I can comfortably say that. But if we aren't close, I will choose the other one to say. He/She deserves it I want to sound like real foreigners so swearing is a perfect reason for this.	I only scowl and get annoyed with people who don't accept to listen to suggestions

For Case 2:

Table 4. Explanation for the use of “Oh my goodness!” by male and female participants

<i>Answers</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<i>Because of politeness. I don't usually use swearwords outside</i>	55	70
<i>Just a habit.</i>	47	51
<i>I was taught not to swear in front of other people</i>	21	28
<i>Others</i>	I didn't get hit on the head which is a blessing	

Table 5. Explanation for the use of “What the fuck!” by male and female participants

<i>Answers</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<i>Just a habit.</i>	37	19
<i>I couldn't control my feelings</i>	23	14
<i>Others</i>	I'll keep it in mind because there were a lot of people around	

Generally, the major explanation of both genders for the use of indirect swearwords is because of politeness, other than that is because it is participants' habit to use those terms and they were simply taught to say in such a way. A minor number of participants use direct swearwords and the reasons provided by both genders are that it is their habit and that they couldn't control their feelings. Since both genders were equally taught which somehow affects their habit of using swearwords in the learning process, this challenges Lakoff's idea that 'women's language' is not actively adopted by men as well as inequality in the treatment of men and women.

The results of 5 questions below will further discuss the habit of genders using English swearwords.

In Figure 3, generally, at the normal emotional stage, more than half of the participants of both genders don't often swear. In particular, the number of males swearing is 5% higher than that of women.

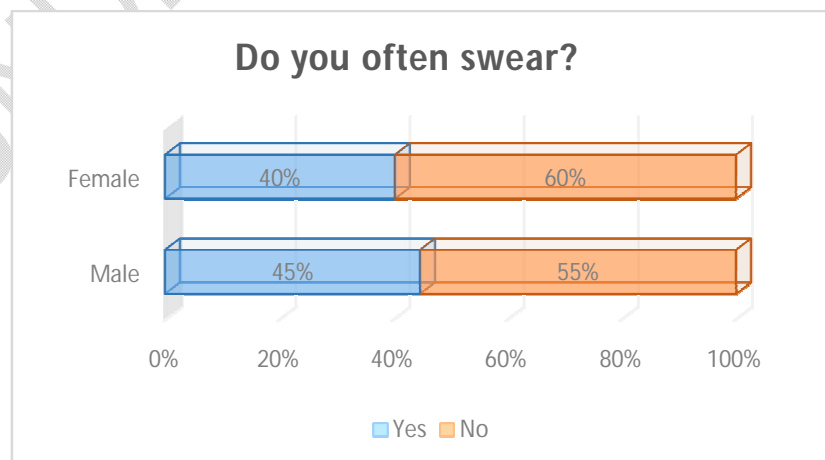


Figure 3. Female and male participants' answers to the survey question "Do you often swear?"

In Figure 4, when it comes to stronger emotional stage, more than half of male and female participants choose to swear. There are barely any differences in the answer of male participants compared to that of female participants.

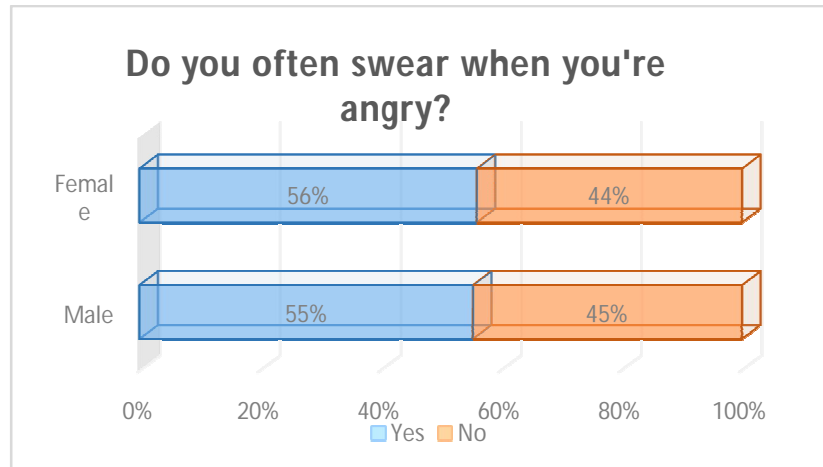


Figure 4. Female and male participants' answers to the survey question "Do you often swear when you're angry?"

Results of Figure 5 and 6 contradict each other. Figure 6 illustrates that 22% of female participants and 23% of male participants do not fear that they would be judged badly when being heard swearing socially.

However, while that 22% of female participants feel free to swear socially as answered in Figure 5, 38%, not just 23% of male participants, often swear socially. This means that even though 15% of male participants fear being judged if swearing, they still do it. This contradiction can be explained by previous research's argument that men don't think as much about what they say as women do and that they want to challenge others. This 15% of males also correlates with 16% of males who swear directly and socially in Case 2 as mentioned above.

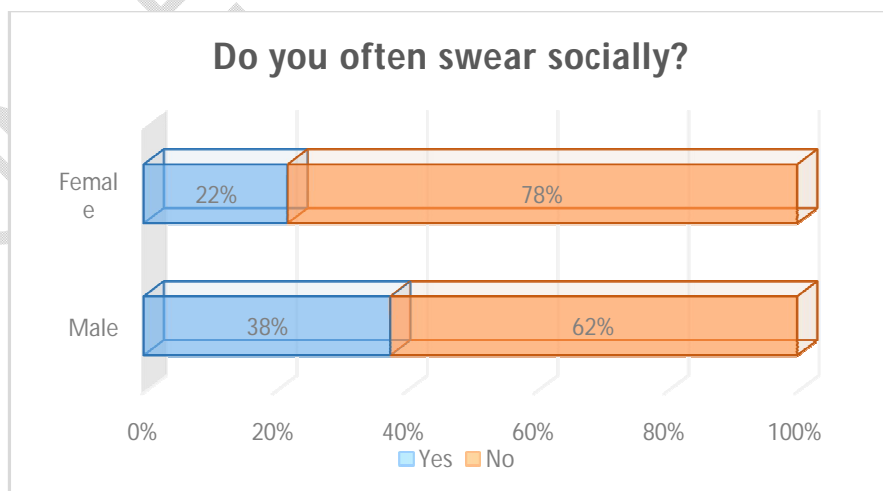


Figure 5. Female and male participants' answers to the survey question "Do you often swear socially?"

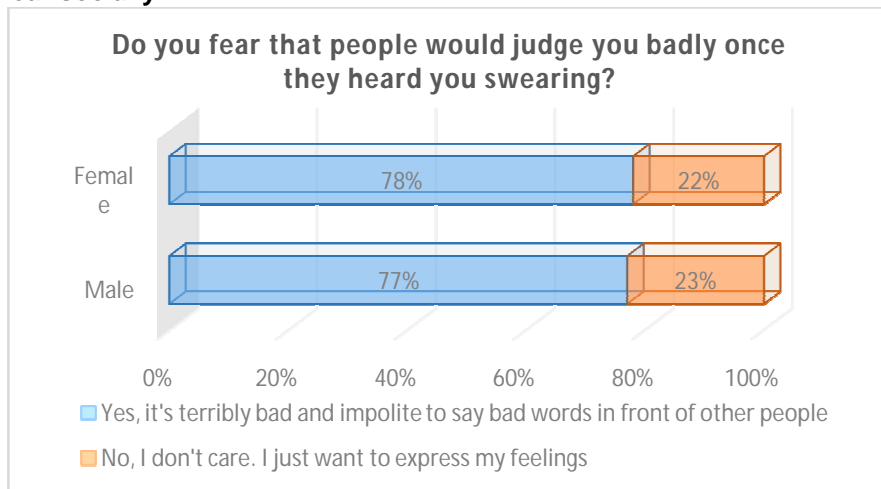


Figure 6. Female and male participants' answers to the survey question "Do you fear that people would judge you badly once they heard you swearing?"

The result in Figure 7 shows that more than half of participants think that swearing in English rather than Vietnamese would reduce the impoliteness. I will discuss this in the latter section as it is connected to other traits of men's and women's language.

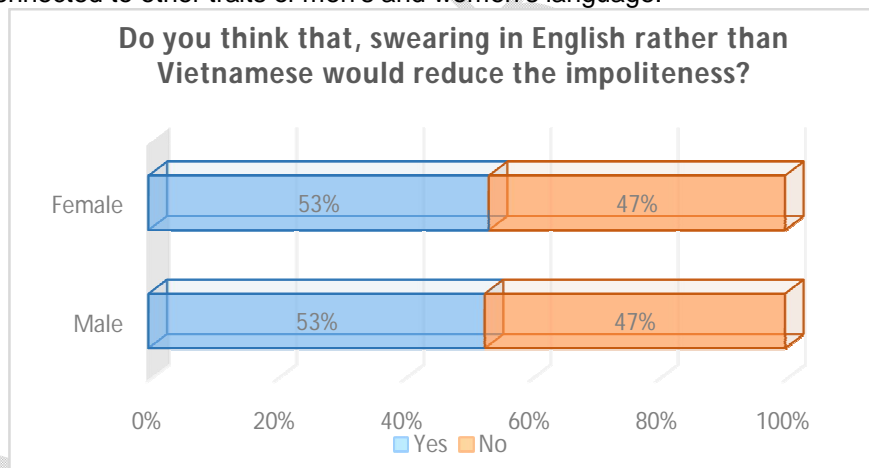


Figure 7. Female and male participants' answers to the survey question "Do you think that, swearing in English rather than Vietnamese would reduce the impoliteness?"

5. DISCUSSION

In general, results from the survey reveal that there are barely any gender differences in the use of English swearwords by Vietnamese learners. Summing up some findings, it can be noticed that although participants do swear quite frequently, most of them prefer using indirect rather than direct swearwords for politeness, to avoid hurting other feelings, or because it's just a habit that they have developed themselves through social experiences and that they have been taught by the seniors to not use direct swearwords. Either the users

of indirect or direct swearwords, even in an emotional state, would first consider the surroundings and the relationship with the listeners before making decisions on their choice of swearwords. The majority of participants seem to share the same fear of being judged if they swear socially as it is an act of impoliteness, which makes them restrain themselves from swearing in public. Only a minority, disregards the judgment from the surroundings and still use swearwords to express their emotions. This is also the only gender difference trait noticed is that there are a number of men, despite the fear of being judged for swearing socially, who still do it anyway.

The similarities in behaviors and attitudes towards swearing can be attributed to Vietnam's unique socio-cultural context, which has complex and, to some extent, contradictory view upon swearing and gender. Due to heavy influence of Confucianism stereotypes and prejudices against women, Vietnamese culture traditionally develops a negative attitude towards women who swear, judging them as lack of modest manner, proper speech and moral behavior (Vu & Yamada, 2024). The fundamental idea of "face" (thể diện) also strongly navigates the way Vietnamese people interact with others based on sets of hierarchy, especially in communication where swearing and the use of filthy words are regarded as inappropriate and disrespectful (Kien, 2015). Women who swear are often marked as ill-mannered, coming from an uncultured and undisciplined family, which could harm their marriage prospects and family's reputation. For women born in major cities such as the capital, the socio-cultural expectation for linguistic manners is even more stressful compared to women from rural areas. For what they say would represent the characteristics of the whole female residents as well as the "face" of the capital, Hanoi women are likely criticized by media for their non-conforming linguistic behaviors, accusing by journalist Minh (2015), "Con gái Hà Nội xinh... nhưng nói tục quá" (Hanoi women are pretty... but swear too much). Nonetheless, it is also the media that challenges such prejudice against women who swear. The idea of "face" and "losing face" starts being equally applied to men who swear, with women on the news sharing their perspectives that they would hesitate to marry a guy who swears a lot in women's presence. Culture Newspaper (2019), the spokesman of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, has been propagandizing a non-biased communication value in which words should only be uttered respectfully towards the listeners regardless of their gender. The campaign directed by the Department of Culture, Sport and Tourism aims at reducing the use of swearwords among Hanoi residents of all ages, from children, and youths at school to adults, restoring the civilized atmosphere at the capital (Chung, 2015). Such social movement has emphasized the current reality of how Vietnam has moved towards a society of equal treatment for all and that this standard is penetrated in the linguistic behaviors of Vietnamese youths of both genders through the fact that they adopt the same ways of using swearwords as well as develop similar attitudes towards the use of swearwords in public.

Towards the severe judgement against women who swear, Journalist Thy (2015) argues that women may swear a lot but that doesn't imply their ill manner and education. Commenting on the campaign against swearing in Hanoi, Doctor Bui of the Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Arts addresses the solutions to socioeconomic problems should also be included. Frustrations accumulated internally from worries and pressure at work, in social relationships, and in the family will eventually be released through swearwords. Compared to action, word is a convenient way to reduce all the dissatisfactions and agonizing feelings. Rapid socioeconomic development since the 1986 Reform policy in Vietnam has stimulated the increase in labor demand and the spread of compulsory education for all, paving the way for women to join in labor forces, starting the era of the modern dual-income family type in Vietnam. Nevertheless, the responsibilities within the households, such as housework are not generally shared between men and women as corresponding to financial aspects (An and Kazuyo, 2018). In other words, Vietnamese women now bear not just economic but also

within-family pressures of maintaining traditional caring duties that are not easy to balance, causing more women to seek stress reduction through swearwords.

At the same time, swearing, ironically, is also considered a part of Vietnamese culture. Professor Tran of the Literature Department at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh once stated in his work: "Discovering the Identity of Vietnamese Culture" that "with rhyming style and strict structure, Vietnamese people can swear day and night without getting bored. It is an art that no other culture in the world possesses" (Phan, 2010). After 5 years of residing in Vietnam, an Australian lecturer commented on Vietnamese swearing culture as a way to express not just one's agony or anger for stress-reducing purposes but also intimacy among friends (Shingleton, 2018). Thus, this swearing culture isn't partial towards any gender and is adopted more actively by women than men sometimes.

To mediate both the government's goal of maintaining a non-swearing polite atmosphere and personal desire to reduce stress and build intimacy as parts of cultural expression, indirect swearwords appear as a favorable choice. Vietnamese indirect swearwords, while still carrying the same meanings as direct swearwords, are changed in a boundlessly creative manner to make them less obscene, such as abbreviations, paraphrasing, phonetic reverse, replacing with words of different meanings but slightly similar in pronunciation, or even using English swearwords – which explains why half of the participants have in mind that swearing in English would reduce the impoliteness. Also, there is a set of unspoken rules about swearing spreading in society. Aware of the fact that swearing is not, and cannot be forbidden, parents focus on educating their sons and daughters on when, where, and in which situations they are allowed to swear. For example, while swearing directly or indirectly is permitted when talking with close friends, it is impolite and disrespectful to use any type of swearwords in conversation with or in the presence of strangers, seniors, and children. In public, although it is suggested not to swear at all, if falling in the case that one cannot control their feelings, one should try to use indirect swearwords. Most importantly, under no circumstances is a person allowed to use swearwords to hurt other people's feelings or disgrace others verbally. This set of rules which takes "politeness" as the core is applied to everyone regardless of their gender.

With this understanding of Vietnam's socio-cultural context about swearing and gender, it's reasonable why the results of the survey reveal significant differences from original gender patterns in English. That both genders prefer indirect swearwords reflects Vietnam cultural emphasis on politeness that influences their linguistic habits. Unlike women in Western cultures, who are disciplined to talk like a lady while Western men are allowed more freedom in verbal choice, both men and women in Vietnam receive the same treatment which expects them to keep in mind the politeness rules in communication. This explains why in the first case, even when participants are in anger, the majority of both genders still avoid using strong and direct swearwords so as not to hurt other's feelings. Even in surprised situations as in case 2 where words coming out of their mouths are uncontrollable, the use of direct swearwords by both genders "What the fuck" is totally prevailed by that of indirect swearword "Oh my goodness". Meanwhile, the unfavorability of direct swearwords by both genders also points out the equal position of both genders in society where all are being judged equally if crossing the swearing boundary. The general assumption is that the more direct swearwords are, the stronger a person wants to reinforce their position in society as people tend to pay more attention to opinions that are expressed strongly and forcefully. While in English native countries where this stronger means of expression is allowed for men and forbidden for women, this biased norm doesn't exist in Vietnamese culture, therefore, is not found in the English of Vietnamese learners. The preference for English indirect swearwords shows the connection with Vietnam's swearing culture and socio-economic

pressure, which allows speakers to freely express themselves while still staying within the limit permitted.

In a broader view, the findings reveal the significant impacts of culture on the English language acquisition of Vietnamese learners. According to Vygotskian theory, the use of English swearwords by Vietnamese learners is affected by both their native culture and the “English” new culture. The majority of the participants, regardless of gender, use English swearwords in the same way they use Vietnamese swearwords, which is influenced by swearing norms in Vietnam’s socio-cultural environment. Yet, the participants develop perceptual ways of their own to mediate English and Vietnamese cultures. The result of such cultural mediation in language learning is most apparent in Figure 7 with the question “Do you think that, swearing in English rather than Vietnamese would reduce the impoliteness?” More than half of male and female participants agreed that swearing in English rather than in Vietnamese would reduce the impoliteness of swearing. This is based on the confidence that not all Vietnamese listeners can understand, even if they do, they would possibly bear the same perspective as the speakers that it’s not as impolite to swear in English, either using direct or indirect swearwords, as to swear in Vietnamese. Moreover, the answer collected from Table 3 triggers a hypothesis behind the attitude and perception towards the use of English swearwords, for the participants “want to sound like real foreigners.” The word “foreigners” in this case means English native speakers, originating from the Vietnamese term “người nước ngoài” referring to people from outside of Vietnam, and all are generally assumed to speak English. While the data regarding this is not enough to make assumptions for the majority, this could be how participants perceive the English swearing culture in particular, and English-speaking countries’ culture in general.

6. IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this paper would contribute to the pedagogical improvements in English education for Vietnamese, specifically, in cross-cultural communication. It suggests English teachers pay extra attention to the way Vietnamese students perceive the use of English swearwords. Although the linguistic behaviors of Vietnamese students seem fairly polite, they tend to swear much more than expected, which could cause issues in cross-cultural communication. The learners’ belief that swearing in English would reduce the impoliteness of swearing might be applicable within Vietnam, or at least in conversation with the Vietnamese. In reality, native English speakers may swear a lot more than non-native speakers but they are tremendously mindful of the communication circumstances and the listeners to choose appropriate words (Dewaele, 2015; Salačová, 2019). Teachers should guide students in understanding these nuanced rules of swearing in English.

Moreover, cross-cultural communication means not only conversational interaction between one English non-native country and English-native countries but among many non-native countries as well. Politeness is suggested to be put on top of all criteria as it shows the speaker’s respect to the listeners despite nationality as English, in this case, no longer belongs to one culture but serves as “the basis for promoting cross-cultural understanding” (McKay, 2004, p.20). The over-reliant use of English swearwords would result in damaging the image of Vietnamese in foreign listeners’ eyes. This point was drawn from the author’s experience in Japan, where swearing led to discomfort among Japanese peers whose culture highly values politeness.

Additionally, the research contributes to the theoretical framework that moves beyond the gender binary approach in the language field. Gender, influenced by culture, is more sophisticated to be simplified into female/male categories. Forcefully imposing a binary approach on English language learners, in the case of Vietnam, would cause harm to the

students' identities and unconsciously promoting discrimination. Foreign language education should empower students to express their true identities, ensure inclusivity in classroom, and facilitate cross-cultural communication.

7. CONCLUSION

In summary, the research suggests that Vietnamese men and women speak English similarly, with minimal gender-based differences. Both genders adopt each other's linguistic traits, leading to a negligible distinction in their speech patterns. This lack of difference can be attributed to the equal treatment of genders and the cultural emphasis on politeness, which transcends gender norms. Interestingly, while English swearwords are used by Vietnamese learners as a tool to sound like native speakers and reduce perceived impoliteness, this approach may cause misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication due to a lack of understanding of native contexts. Therefore, it's essential for English education in Vietnam to include cross-cultural communication and cultural studies. The findings support the view that gender differences in English may not be universal and that further research is needed, especially in non-Western cultures and less-developed areas of Vietnam. Future studies should consider various sociocultural factors to better understand gender differences in English among Vietnamese learners, and ongoing research should involve future generations to stay relevant.

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

Option 1:

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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