



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

Nguyen Ba Dieu Linh ^{a*} and Pham To Hoa ^b

^a Department of Asia Pacific Studies, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Japan.

^b Department of English Language, Hanoi Open University, Vietnam.

Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Aims: to explore how English swearwords were used by Vietnamese female and male English learners (i) to find if there were 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 moved 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 included the authors' own observations in English classes within Vietnam and abroad experience of using English in Japan.

*Corresponding author: E-mail: dieulinh.nguyenba12@gmail.com;

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Results: Responses revealed slight differences between male and female participants in the use of English swearwords and perceptions towards swearwords. Although participants did swear quite frequently, most of them (including male and female) preferred 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 had been taught by the seniors to not use direct swearwords. Either the users of indirect or direct swearwords, even in an emotional state, a number of male and female participants 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, seemed to share the same fear of being judged for swearing socially which seemed to restrain themselves from swearing in public. Only a minority, disregarded the judgment from the surroundings and still used swearwords to express their emotions. This was also the only gender difference trait that correlated to previous research on gender differences in the use of English swearwords by Lakoff.

Conclusion: Male and female Vietnamese English learners had similar ways in the use and attitudes towards English swearwords and swearing culture which were different from previous studies of gender differences in English by Lakoff. This suggests a different approach to English teaching in Vietnam which emphasizes a need to include cultural studies and language manners regarding swearing 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 considered language as a key to challenge and change male dominance (Romaine, 2000). The purposes of the study of language and gender varied. 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 was 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 focused on the questions of how, what reasons, and what motivations led to men's and women's distinctive choices of words and ways of constructing sentences following communicating circumstances. The understanding of social and cultural factors that bore influences on gender norms which were

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 didn't necessarily mean that one gender was better at English than another, or just because one gender was more suitable with the language field than 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, 2021).

Among gender patterns in the list of gender differences by the field's pioneer, Robin Lakoff, the use of English swearwords by gender was an important reflection of existing gender roles, norms, and status in society. In general, swearing - a linguistic behavior containing 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) noticed that swearwords used by men tended to be more

direct than the swearwords that women frequently used. For instance, men tended to use very direct swearwords (fuck, shit, and damn) while women tended to use indirect ones (oh my goodness, oh dear, and oh fudge). She attributed this difference to societal expectations: women were expected to behave in a ladylike manner, which included avoiding overt displays of anger, whereas men were permitted to express their emotions more freely. This societal double standard led to differences in how men and women used 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 were used by Vietnamese female and male English learners. Specifically, the objectives included: (i) to find if there were any differences or similarities in the way both

genders used 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 was later set off into two camps, which were the dominance approach and the cultural approach.

The dominance approach of Lakoff, Freeman, and McElhinny had 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 appeared to take the same path as the field of sexism in language which focused 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, had a lot to say behind the findings that men swore more often and used more direct swearwords than women. Research about the use of swearwords by two genders conducted in Sweden showed that women used fewer swearwords than men as they didn't want to hurt other people's feelings and they wanted to be seen as a person of a higher social class than their present class (Sollid, 2008). Ella and Lucas (2009) 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 used swearwords was recorded to be incredibly higher than that of women (Schweinberger, 2008). 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." 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 were 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 were “trapped in gender roles” (Holmes, 2013).

The cultural approach proposed by Maltz and Broker, Tannen, and Wardhaugh still recognized the dominance approach but further explained gender differences as the result of cultural differences based on sex separation during early childhood (Choucane, 2016). Commenting on men’s dominance in conversation, Tannen (1990) and Wardhaugh (2002) argued that it was not always because they did 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 didn’t serve as a denial of the dominance approach, on the contrary, it “provides a model for explaining how dominance can be created in face-to-face interaction” (Tannen, 1994). 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 considered themselves at that moment. In the qualitative research on the language of men and women in the workplace in America, Basow (2008) indicated the similarities in communication style of both genders in general, yet, the differences only start to appear when it came to specific situations (such as job applications, salary negotiations, when making decisions, handling conflicts, and working as supervisors/leaders). Ali (2009) commented that the results of gender differences were inconsistent, suggesting the inclusion of socio-cultural contexts in further studies. In this light, there has been a call for research on gender differences to consider socio-cultural elements as well as the conditions under which both genders interacted in analyzing linguistic behaviors Eldelsky, 1981, as cited in Tannen, (1993).

2.2 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 have raised questions about the universality of these gender patterns. Ning et al. (2010) stated that, as gender was constructed socially, it varied with times and societies. While agreeing on the found gender traits, Wardhaugh (2002) was well aware of the bi-directional influence in the relationship of language and culture, which meant, that if one changed, so did 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 agreed with Tannen’s idea when pointing out that one of the most significant gaps in research on gender differences in English was 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 served as evidence reinforcing statements regarding sociocultural impacts that closely linked with the background of the students in language class. Although Lakoff (1973) stated that the majority of gender difference traits in English could be applied to the majority of English speakers around the world, recent sociolinguists such as Holmes (2013) argued 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 was not similar to Lakoff’s assumption. The same research in an international school in Indonesia by Nicolau & Sukanto (2004) also showed that female participants employed 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 started moving towards a non-binary approach to language study. Norton and Pavlenko (2004) argued that the

female/male dichotomy tended to oversimplify gender differences and ignore other sociocultural factors, the same as Tannen has mentioned as shown above, which made 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 could no longer be categorized in female/male binary, there was 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, 2020; Peters, 2024). A non-binary gender approach in the field of language education was 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 might face challenges or even harm if English teachers applied 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).

3. METHODOLOGY

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

A survey was 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 included: 2 cases that required participants to choose their

preferred verbal choice of swearwords in specific situations, then came with one question asking for the motivations behind their choices 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 were 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?”, which was inspired by the authors’ speculation during introspection. As the primary purpose for using Lakoff’s dominance model was to examine whether gender differences in the use of English swearwords were truly adopted by Vietnamese learners, this paper didn’t develop a statistical quantitative approach from this survey but only presented raw data which was 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 was that the popularity of English in education only started amplifying in 1994. Thus, participants of these ages were supposed to have been approaching English learning for at least 12 years of education, which was a sufficient amount of time for English to penetrate participants’ linguistic behaviors.

As shown in Table 1, there were in total of 318 Vietnamese English learners participating in the survey, and the number of male and female participants was equal. Since the authors cooperated with Vietnamese English teachers working at Hanoi Open University of Vietnam, the majority of the participants were 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

Table 1. Demographic of survey’s participants

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

(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%) were Vietnamese English learners studying or having 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.

The introspection included 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 was that the authors can witness the changes in her use of English swearwords following changes in socio-cultural contexts. It was 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 was 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?

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?

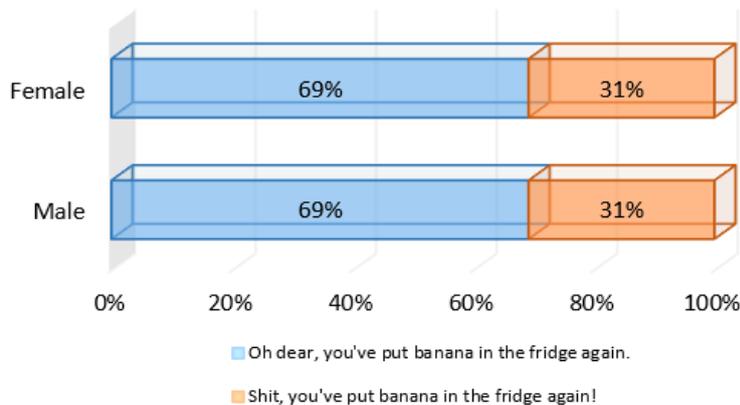


Fig. 1. Case 1

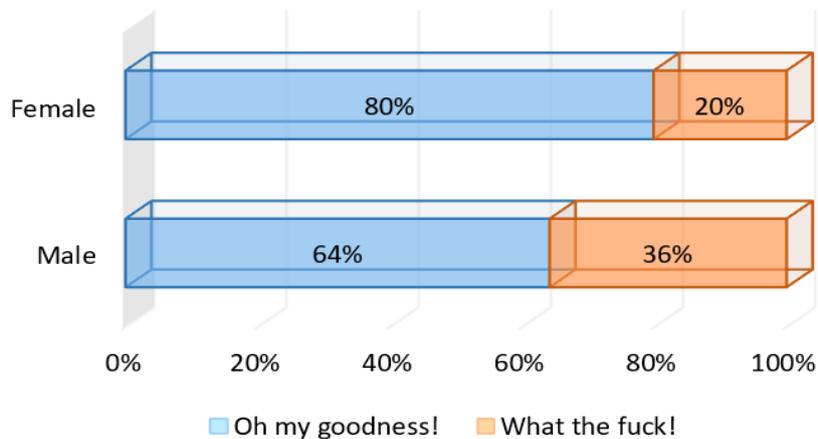


Fig. 2. Case 2

Overall, the majority of participants, including men and women, used indirect swearwords (“oh dear” and “oh my goodness”) instead of direct ones (“shit” and “fuck”), which was not correlated to Lakoff’s statement. In case 1, Fig. 1 showed that the proportion of females and males using “oh dear” was equal. The same happened to the proportion of females and males using “shit”. In

case 2, the use of swearwords by genders changes as we witnessed more females chose indirect swearword - “oh my goodness” than males. The percentage difference was 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

Answers	Male	Female
Because of politeness. I don't want to hurt others' feelings.	74	77
Just a habit.	40	32
I was taught not to swear in front of other people	24	20
Others	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

Answers	Male	Female
Just a habit.	32	32
I couldn't control my feelings	17	21
Others	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

Answers	Male	Female
Because of politeness. I don't usually use swearwords outside	55	70
Just a habit.	47	51
I was taught not to swear in front of other people	21	28
Others	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

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

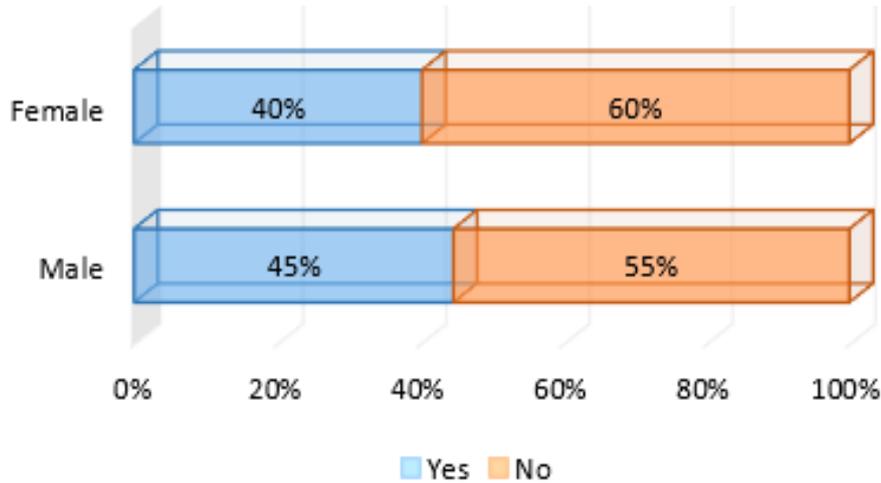


Fig. 3. Female and male participants' answers to the survey question “Do you often swear?”

Generally, the major explanation of both genders for the use of indirect swearwords was because of politeness, other than that was because it's the participants' habit to use those terms and they were simply taught to say in such a way. A minor number of participants used direct swearwords and the reasons provided by both genders were that it was 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 challenged Lakoff's idea that 'women's language' was not actively adopted by men as well as inequality in the treatment of men and women.

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

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

In Fig. 4, when it came to the stronger emotional stage, more than half of male and female participants chose to swear. There were barely

any differences in the answers of male participants compared to that of female participants.

Results of Figs. 5 and 6 contradicted each other. Fig. 6 illustrated that 22% of female participants and 23% of male participants did not fear that they would be judged badly when being heard swearing socially.

However, while that 22% of female participants felt free to swear socially as answered in Fig. 5, 38%, not just 23% of male participants, often swore socially. This meant that even though 15% of male participants feared of being judged if swearing, they still did it. This contradiction can be explained by previous research's argument that men didn't think as much about what they said as women and that they wanted to challenge others. This 15% of males also correlated with 16% of males who swore directly and socially in Case 2 as mentioned above.

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

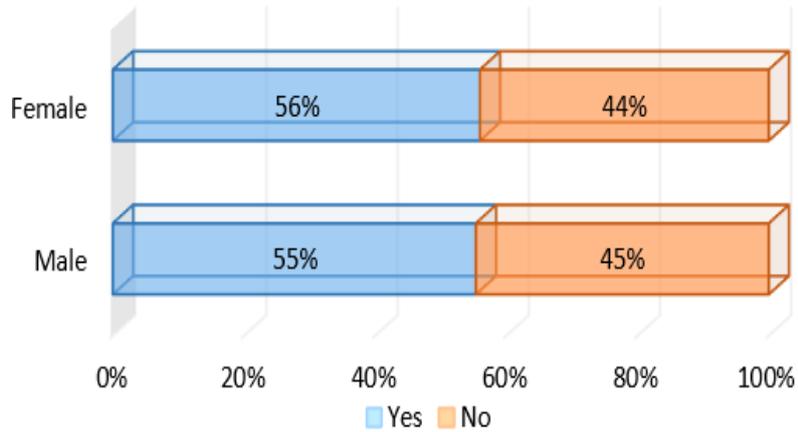


Fig. 4. Female and male participants' answers to the survey question "Do you often swear when you're angry?"

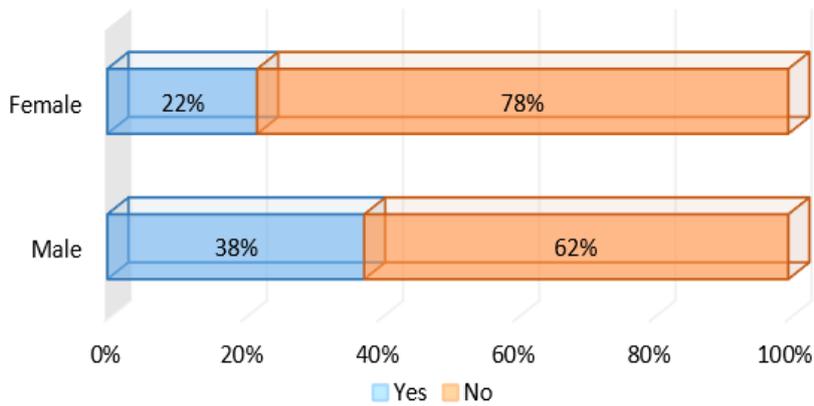


Fig. 5. Female and male participants' answers to the survey question "Do you often swear socially?"

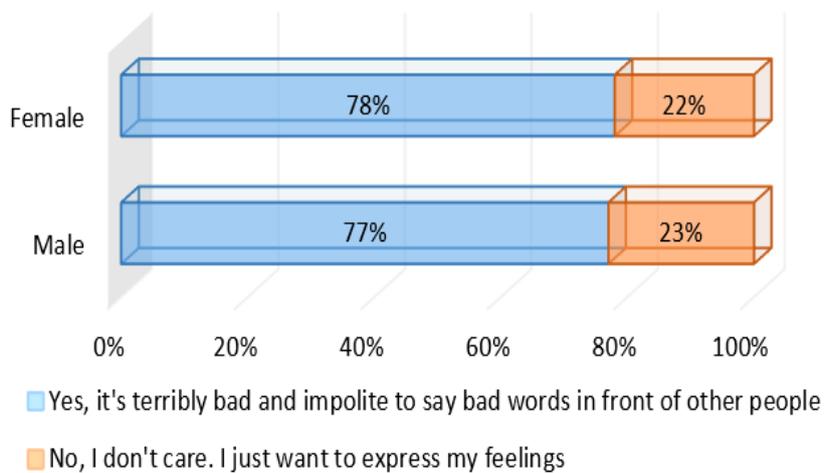


Fig. 6. Female and male participants' answers to the survey question "Do you fear that people would judge you badly once they heard you swearing?"

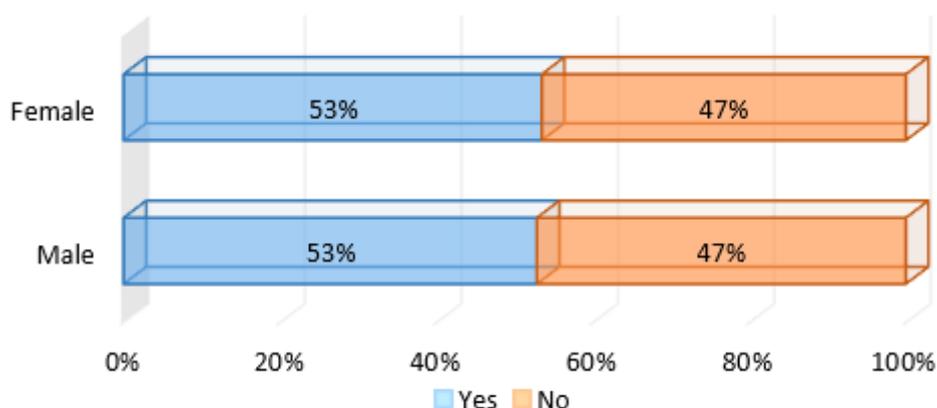


Fig. 7. Female and male participants’ answers to the survey question “Do you think that, swearing in English rather than Vietnamese would reduce the impoliteness?”

5. DISCUSSION

In general, results from the survey revealed that there were barely any gender differences in the use of English swearwords by Vietnamese learners. Summing up some findings, it could be noticed that although participants did swear quite frequently, most of them preferred 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 seemed to share the same fear of being judged if swearing socially as it was an act of impoliteness, which made some of them restrain themselves from swearing in public. Only a minority, disregarded the judgment from the surroundings and still used swearwords to express their emotions. This was also the only gender difference trait noticed that correlated to Lakoff’s findings, that a number of men, despite the fear of being judged for swearing socially, still did it anyway.

The similarities in behaviors and attitudes towards swearing could be attributed to Vietnam’s unique socio-cultural context, which has complex and, to some extent, contradictory views on swearing and gender. Due to the heavy influence of Confucianism stereotypes and prejudices against women, Vietnamese culture has traditionally developed a negative attitude towards women who swear, judging them as

lacking 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 were 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 aimed 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 has penetrated the linguistic behaviors of Vietnamese youths of both genders through the fact that they adopted the same ways of using swearwords as well as developed similar attitudes towards the use of swearwords in public.

Regarding the severe judgment against women who swear, Journalist Thy (2015) argued that women might swear a lot but that didn'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 addressed 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 were not generally shared between men and women as corresponding to financial aspects (An & 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, were 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 had 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, 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 that the results of the survey revealed significant differences from original gender patterns in English. That both genders preferred indirect swearwords reflects Vietnam's cultural emphasis on politeness which influences their linguistic habits. Unlike women in Western cultures, who were disciplined to talk like a lady while Western men were allowed more freedom in verbal choice, both men and women in Vietnam received the same treatment which expected them to keep in mind the politeness rules in communication. This explains why in the first case, even when participants were in anger,

the majority of both genders still avoided using strong and direct swearwords so as not to hurt other's feelings. Even in surprised situations as in case 2 where words came out of their mouths uncontrollably, the use of direct swearwords by both genders "What the fuck" was 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 was allowed for men and forbidden for women, this biased norm doesn't exist in Vietnamese culture and, therefore, was 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 permitted limit.

In a broader view, the findings revealed 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 was 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 was influenced by swearing norms in Vietnam's socio-cultural environment. Yet, the participants have developed perceptual ways of their own to mediate English and Vietnamese cultures. The result of such cultural mediation in language learning is most apparent in Fig. 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 might be 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

triggered 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 referred to 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 that 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; Leaper & Ayres, 2007; Civil Law, 2015; Trong, 2019). 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 valued politeness.

Additionally, the research contributes to the existing works that move 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 promote discrimination. Foreign language education should empower students to express their true identities, ensure inclusivity in the classroom, and facilitate cross-cultural communication.

7. CONCLUSION

In summary, the research suggested that Vietnamese men and women spoke English similarly, with minimal gender-based differences. Both genders adopted 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 transcended gender norms. Interestingly, while English swearwords were used and perceived by Vietnamese learners as a tool to sound like native speakers and reduce 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 upcoming research should involve future generations to stay relevant.

DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

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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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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