

Empowering voices: A framework for gender-inclusive language teaching and learning

Jillan Rae Cubero-Simogan ^{1,*} and Evelyn Torsino Bagood ²

¹ Department of Education, Division of Agusan del Sur, Philippines.

² Department of Graduate Studies, North Eastern Mindanao State University, Philippines.

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Abstract

Language is a powerful tool that shapes perceptions, constructs social identities, and can foster inclusion or perpetuate bias. In educational contexts, integrating gender-inclusive language is crucial for promoting equity, respect, and engagement among diverse learners. This study aimed to develop a practical framework for gender-inclusive language teaching in English classrooms within secondary education. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions with teachers, students, and administrators from two Philippine high schools. Findings reveal that while teachers demonstrate moderate awareness and adoption of gender-inclusive strategies—such as using preferred pronouns and avoiding gendered assumptions—challenges remain, particularly stakeholder resistance and lack of formal training. The study also shows a strong positive impact of inclusive language on student confidence, participation, and classroom collaboration. Based on these insights, a four-layered framework is proposed, emphasizing institutional policy, pedagogical strategies, cultural transformation, and continuous feedback. This research underscores the necessity of systemic interventions to sustain inclusive practices in language education, offering valuable implications for future curriculum development and teacher training programs.

Keywords: Gender-Inclusive Language; Inclusive Education; Language Teaching; Sociolinguistics; Critical Pedagogy; Educational Equity

1. Introduction

Language plays a critical role in shaping social perceptions and gender identities. In educational contexts, gender-inclusive language fosters a more equitable and respectful learning environment. Scholars argue that the use of inclusive language challenges traditional gender norms and promotes critical thinking among learners.

Despite growing awareness, the implementation of gender-inclusive practices remains inconsistent, often due to a lack of structured frameworks, training, and institutional support. Educators face challenges in adapting language teaching practices to support diverse gender identities effectively.

This study seeks to address these gaps by developing a practical framework for integrating gender-inclusive language teaching strategies into English classrooms, grounded in empirical evidence from secondary education settings.

* Corresponding author: Jillan Rae Cubero-Simogan

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design and Locale

A mixed-methods approach was adopted. Surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions were conducted among teachers and students in two national high schools in Agusan del Sur, Philippines — Azpetia National High School (rural) and Agusan del Sur National High School (urban).

2.2. Participants and Instruments

Respondents included language teachers, students, and school administrators. A structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide, based on validated tools such as the IASNL, were used to assess perceptions, integration, challenges, and impacts of gender-inclusive language teaching.

3. Results and Discussion

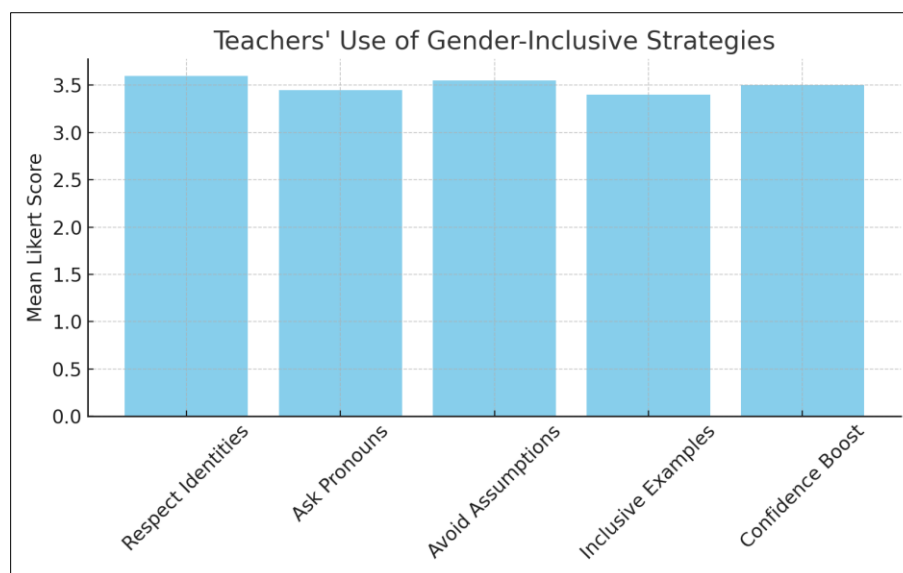


Figure 1 Mean scores for the use of gender-inclusive strategies by teachers

This bar graph presents the average scores that teachers gave themselves regarding how often they use specific gender-inclusive strategies in the classroom. Each strategy was rated using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always).

3.1. Key findings from Figure 1:

Respect for Non-Binary and Transgender Students had the highest mean score of 3.60, meaning teachers most often respected diverse identities.

Avoiding Gender Assumptions also scored high at 3.55, suggesting growing sensitivity in language.

Asking Preferred Names and Pronouns (mean = 3.45) and Inclusive Examples (mean = 3.40) showed moderate to frequent usage.

These results show that while teachers are moderately consistent in using inclusive practices, there is still room to improve consistency across all strategies.

Figure 1 shows that teachers are becoming more aware and accepting of gender diversity, but institutional support and further training could help increase these practices more uniformly.

Table 1 Observed Impacts of Gender-Inclusive Language on Students

Table 1 Frequency of observed impacts among respondents.

Impact	Frequency (%)
Increased participation	78%
Improved collaboration	73%
Enhanced communication confidence	80%
Reduction in teasing	65%

This table shows the percentage of respondents (teachers) who observed specific positive impacts in their classrooms after adopting gender-inclusive language.

3.2. Key findings from Table 1:

- Enhanced communication confidence (80%): The most commonly observed impact. Students felt more confident expressing themselves when inclusive language was used.
- Increased participation (78%): Students, especially those from gender-diverse backgrounds, were more willing to engage in class discussions.
- Improved collaboration (73%): Peer-to-peer interactions became more respectful and inclusive.
- Reduction in teasing (65%): Although still a concern, gender-based teasing declined as a result of inclusive language practices.

Table 1 means the adoption of gender-inclusive language seems to directly improve student engagement, confidence, and classroom dynamics. However, a 65% rate for teasing reduction suggests that more systemic efforts (like anti-bullying programs) are needed alongside language

4. Conclusion

This study highlights the significant role of gender-inclusive language in creating equitable and empowering classroom environments. By examining awareness, integration, and the perceived effectiveness of gender-inclusive practices among teachers and students, it was evident that inclusive language positively influences student confidence, participation, and collaboration. However, despite these positive outcomes, challenges such as stakeholder resistance, limited formal training, and inconsistent application of practices were observed. Addressing these challenges requires a systemic, multi-layered approach.

A proposed framework consisting of policy development, pedagogical strategies, cultural transformation, and feedback mechanisms aims to provide educators and institutions with practical tools to implement sustainable gender-inclusive practices. Institutional support through training, curriculum revision, and community engagement is essential to bridge existing gaps between awareness and practice. Furthermore, promoting a school culture that values diversity and inclusivity can ensure lasting impact beyond individual classrooms.

In conclusion, gender-inclusive language is not merely a linguistic adjustment but a transformative educational strategy that fosters respect, critical thinking, and social justice. To maximize its benefits, coordinated efforts across policy, pedagogy, and culture are essential. Future research could further explore the longitudinal impacts of inclusive language practices on student academic outcomes, identity development, and broader societal change

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgments

All participants voluntarily consented to participate in the study. Confidentiality was maintained through the anonymization of responses. The author gratefully acknowledges the support of North Eastern Mindanao State University, participating schools, and all respondents who contributed valuable insights.

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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