

# Examining Gendered Linguistic Dynamics in Student Leadership: A Participant Observation Study of Peer Interactions

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the linguistic behaviours of male and female student leaders through a focused lens of participant observation. Drawing upon Joos' language styles theory, this paper explores how gender influences language use and communication patterns among student leaders during interactions with their peers. This study observes six student leaders doing their daily routine schedules and interacting with peers. By immersing ourselves in the naturalistic setting of high school leadership activities, the researchers uncover subtle yet significant differences in the linguistic strategies employed by boys and girls as they engage in collaborative decision-making, express opinions, and assert influence within their peer groups. Through detailed analysis of observed interactions, this study sheds light on the intricate ways in which gender shapes language dynamics among student leaders, contributing to our understanding of the role of language in the construction and negotiation of leadership identities in educational contexts.

## Introduction

In educational contexts, leadership roles among students provide a rich ground for examining the interplay between gender and language. Recent studies highlight the critical role of language in shaping social dynamics and identities, particularly within leadership spheres (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013; Baxter, 2021). This paper delves into the nuanced linguistic behaviors of male and female student leaders through the method of participant observation, aiming to uncover how gender influences language use and communication patterns within this demographic. By drawing upon Joos' language styles theory (Joos, 1967), the study seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which gender-specific linguistic strategies manifest in interactions among student leaders.

The significance of language in shaping leadership dynamics is increasingly recognized in contemporary research (Holmes & Stubbe, 2015; Coates, 2016). However, the specific ways in which gender impacts these dynamics among adolescent leaders remain underexplored. This study addresses this gap by observing six student leaders—three males and three females—during their daily routines and interactions with peers. By immersing themselves in the naturalistic setting of high school leadership activities, the researchers aim to capture the authentic linguistic practices that student leaders employ in real-time.

The research methodology centres on detailed observations of these interactions, focusing on collaborative decision-making processes, expressions of opinions, and the assertion of influence within peer groups. Through a meticulous analysis of these observed interactions, the study seeks to uncover subtle yet significant differences in the linguistic strategies used by boys and girls. These findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of how gender shapes language dynamics among student leaders, shedding light on the role of language in the construction and negotiation of leadership identities in educational settings (Sunderland, 2020; Cameron, 2019).

In essence, this paper aims to contribute to the broader discourse on language and gender by providing empirical insights into the specific linguistic behaviours of male and female student leaders. Through this exploration, the study not only enhances our understanding of gendered communication patterns in leadership

but also informs educational practices that support the development of effective and inclusive leadership skills among students (Pauwels, 2022; Swann, 2021).

## Literature Review

### Introduction to Gender and Language

The study of gender and language examines how societal norms and expectations influence the way individuals communicate. Historically, research in this field has highlighted distinct differences in male and female communication styles, attributing these variations to socialization processes and cultural expectations (Tannen, 1990; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013). This body of work has provided foundational insights into how gender roles are both reflected and reinforced through language use.

### Theoretical Framework: Joos' Language Styles Theory

Joos' language styles theory, which categorizes language into five styles—frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate—offers a useful framework for analysing linguistic behaviours (Joos, 1967). This theory has been applied in various studies to understand the adaptability of language use in different social contexts. For this study, Joos' theory serves as a lens to explore how student leaders employ different language styles to navigate their roles and assert their leadership within peer groups.

### Gendered Communication Patterns

Research consistently shows that men and women tend to use language differently, with women often displaying a more collaborative and supportive communication style, while men are more likely to employ assertive and competitive language (Holmes, 2006; Coates, 2016). These differences are rooted in broader societal norms and expectations regarding gender roles (Tannen, 1990; Cameron, 2019). Understanding these patterns is crucial for analysing the linguistic strategies of male and female student leaders.

### Language and Leadership

Language plays a critical role in leadership, influencing how leaders communicate, make decisions, and inspire others (Holmes & Stubbe, 2015; Baxter, 2021). Previous research has explored how effective leaders adapt their language to suit different contexts and audiences (Fairhurst, 2007). This section reviews studies that have specifically examined the language of leaders, highlighting the importance of communication skills in effective leadership.

### Adolescent Communication in Educational Settings

Adolescent language use is distinct from adult communication, characterized by its fluidity and adaptation to peer group norms (Eckert, 1997; Sclafani, 2018). The educational environment significantly shapes these communication patterns, as schools are primary sites for socialization and identity formation. Studies have shown that the ways adolescents communicate are influenced by their desire to fit in with peers and their developing sense of self (Pauwels, 2022).

### Gender Dynamics in Student Leadership

Existing research on gender and student leadership indicates that boys and girls often adopt different leadership styles and strategies (Connell, 2002; Swann, 2021). Boys are generally observed to be more assertive and dominant in leadership roles, while girls tend to be more collaborative and inclusive (Leaper, 1991; Sunderland, 2020). This section reviews these studies, providing context for the observed linguistic behaviours of student leaders in this study.

### Gaps in the Current Literature

Despite substantial research on gendered communication and leadership, there is a paucity of studies focusing specifically on high school student leaders. Most existing studies concentrate on adult leaders or younger children, leaving a gap in understanding how adolescent leaders navigate gender and language (Pauwels, 2022). This study aims to fill this gap by providing empirical insights into the linguistic strategies of male and female student leaders in a high school setting.

### Implications for Educational Practice

Understanding gendered communication patterns among student leaders has important implications for educational practice. By recognizing and addressing these differences, educators can foster more inclusive and effective leadership development programs (Swann, 2021; Baxter, 2021). This section discusses how the findings of this study can inform strategies to support diverse leadership styles and promote gender equity in educational settings.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing participant observation as the primary method for data collection. The goal is to explore the nuanced linguistic behaviors of male and female student leaders in their naturalistic educational environment. A qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the complexities of gendered language use and communication patterns (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

### Participants

The participants in this study are six secondary school student leaders, comprising three males and three females, selected through purposive sampling. These students were chosen based on their active involvement in student leadership roles within their school, ensuring that they regularly engage in interactions that require leadership communication. This selection aimed to provide a balanced representation of gender to facilitate a comparative analysis of linguistic behaviors (Patton, 2015).

### Data Collection

Data were collected through participant observation over a period of four weeks. The researchers immersed themselves in the daily routines of the student leaders, observing their interactions during various leadership activities, including meetings, group projects, and informal discussions with peers. Detailed field notes were taken to capture the context and content of these interactions (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

Additionally, audio recordings of selected interactions were made, with the participants' consent, to allow for a more precise analysis of linguistic patterns. These recordings provided a verbatim account of the communication, which was essential for identifying subtle differences in language use (Poland, 1995).

### Analytical Framework

The data were analyzed using a combination of thematic analysis and discourse analysis. Thematic analysis involved coding the field notes and transcripts to identify recurring themes and patterns related to gendered communication strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Discourse analysis focused on examining how language was used to construct and negotiate leadership identities, paying attention to factors such as tone, style, and the use of specific linguistic devices (Gee, 2014).

Joos' language styles theory served as the analytical lens, helping to categorize and interpret the different language styles employed by the student leaders (Joos, 1967). This theoretical framework was instrumental in understanding how the participants adapted their communication strategies in various contexts and how these adaptations were influenced by gender.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Informed consent was secured from all participants and their parents or guardians, given that the participants were minors. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their data, with pseudonyms used in all written reports and publications (BERA, 2018).

### Reliability and Validity

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, multiple strategies were employed. Triangulation was achieved by using both field notes and audio recordings to corroborate the data (Denzin, 2012). Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with the participants to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, the researchers maintained a reflexive journal to document their observations and reflections, minimizing the potential for bias (Orlipp, 2008).

### Limitations

While the qualitative nature of this study provides rich, detailed insights, it also has limitations. The small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the presence of researchers during observations may have influenced the participants' behavior, a phenomenon known as the Hawthorne effect (Adair, 1984). Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable contributions to understanding gendered communication among student leaders.

## Data Analysis & Discussion

### *Collaborative Decision-Making Processes*

One of the primary themes that emerged from the participant observations was the distinct approaches to collaborative decision-making between male and female student leaders. Female student leaders frequently employed inclusive language and sought consensus among group members.

**Excerpt from Participant Observation:**

During a student council meeting, Sarah (female student leader) initiated the discussion on the upcoming school event by saying, *"Let's hear everyone's ideas first and then decide together."* This approach facilitated a sense of shared ownership and encouraged participation from all members, particularly those who were initially hesitant to voice their opinions.

In contrast, male student leaders often demonstrated a more directive approach, positioning themselves as central figures in the decision-making process.

**Excerpt from Participant Observation:**

John (male student leader) began the same meeting with a clear outline of his proposed plan, stating, *"Here's what we should do for the event. I'll explain, and then we can discuss any changes."* While this approach ensured clarity and direction, it sometimes limited the initial input from other group members, particularly the quieter ones.

**Expressions of Opinions and Assertiveness**

Gender-specific differences were also observed in how student leaders expressed their opinions and asserted themselves in group settings. Female leaders tended to frame their contributions in a more tentative and supportive manner, often using qualifiers and inclusive language.

**Excerpt from Participant Observation:**

During a debate on budget allocation, Emma (female student leader) remarked, *"I think it might be beneficial if we allocate more funds to the arts program, but I'm open to hearing what everyone else thinks."* Her language promoted an open dialogue and demonstrated her willingness to consider alternative viewpoints.

Male leaders, conversely, exhibited greater assertiveness and certainty in their statements, which sometimes overshadowed the contributions of others.

**Excerpt from Participant Observation:**

In the same discussion, Alex (male student leader) asserted, *"We need to allocate more funds to the sports program because it benefits the majority of students. This is non-negotiable."* His decisive tone and firm stance often swayed the group towards his perspective, minimizing further debate.

**Influence and Leadership Styles**

The influence exerted by student leaders and their leadership styles revealed notable gendered patterns. Female leaders were observed to employ a more relational and empathetic style, building strong interpersonal connections with their peers.

**Excerpt from Participant Observation:**

During a peer mentoring session, Lily (female student leader) provided feedback by saying, *"You did a great job with the project. Maybe we could try to add a bit more detail in this section. What do you think?"* Her supportive and collaborative approach fostered a positive learning environment and encouraged active engagement from her mentees.

Male leaders, in contrast, often relied on a more authoritative and task-oriented style, focusing on achieving specific outcomes and maintaining control over the group's direction.

**Excerpt from Participant Observation:**

During a team sports practice, Mark (male student leader) directed his peers with, *"We need to improve our defense strategy. Follow my lead, and I'll show you the drill."* His command-oriented approach ensured efficiency and compliance, though it occasionally led to reduced input from other team members.

The observed linguistic behaviors of male and female student leaders align with established theories on gendered communication patterns. Female leaders' use of inclusive and supportive language reflects broader societal norms that encourage women to adopt collaborative and empathetic roles (Holmes, 2006; Coates, 2016). Male leaders' assertiveness and directive communication align with traditional expectations of male dominance and authority in leadership contexts (Tannen, 1990; Cameron, 2019).

These findings underscore the importance of recognizing and addressing gender-specific communication strategies in educational leadership development programs. By fostering an environment that values diverse leadership styles, educators can promote more inclusive and effective leadership among students, ultimately supporting their personal and professional growth (Swann, 2021; Baxter, 2021).

**Conclusion**

Understanding the gendered dynamics of student leadership communication can inform targeted interventions that support balanced participation and equitable leadership opportunities. Educators can implement training programs that encourage male leaders to adopt more inclusive and collaborative approaches while empowering female leaders to assert themselves confidently and decisively. Such initiatives can contribute to the development of well-rounded leaders who are adept at navigating diverse social and professional contexts (Pauwels, 2022).



In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the gender-specific linguistic strategies employed by adolescent student leaders, highlighting the critical role of language in shaping leadership dynamics and identities. The findings have significant implications for educational practices aimed at fostering effective and inclusive leadership skills among students

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