



Gender-Neutral Language And Inclusivity: A Qualitative Study On Awareness Among Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract: The study focuses on two major objectives of this research. First, to comprehend the viewpoints that influence gender-neutral language; second, to ascertain how these insights enhance student instructors' attitudes towards gender-neutral language to foster inclusivity. This study was initiated by conducting a qualitative approach on college students of the Education Department from the government college of H.N.B. Garhwal University, Srinagar, Uttarakhand. The sample size for this study was 30. After the survey, content analysis was implemented, followed by the conceptual analysis and thematic analysis method for categorising the data into broader themes. This study focused on eight factors that are expected to influence gender-neutral language. The basic factors included are gender in teaching and learning, awareness, attitude, challenges, and barriers, the learning environment of the student teachers, the use and impact of language and linguistics, the impact of education on gender-neutral language, and language preferences for inclusivity. The findings indicate that the respondents agreed that all these factors influence gender-neutral language and that language neutrality should be emphasised at the teacher training level. Through this study, the researcher determined the awareness of gender-neutral language and its perspective among the pupil teachers. A collaborative perspective to promote the use of gender-neutral terms and to remove stereotypes and prejudice from society is proposed, which is expected to attain growth in the future direction of gender inclusivity. These study specifications can be applied to various sample sizes and age ranges.

Keywords: gender-neutral language, gender inclusivity, pupil teachers, teacher education, gender awareness.

Introduction:

Language is a fundamental unit for communication and expressing thoughts. It serves as a tool to interpret good examples for a better society. Language emphasizes the listener's interest and exemplifies innovations that contribute to the development of social ideas. According to the renowned philosopher Noam Chomsky, language is defined as "The inherent capabilities of native speakers in understanding and producing proper sentences.

Gender-neutral language does not have a desire for any particular gender and it rather ensure that none is outmoded in communication. Originating from the feminist movements of the 1970s, it questions the supremacy of male language and focuses on gender stereotyping. Some of the initial studies stressed the role of performers and the preservation of the gender divide, whereas more contemporary works focus on the proper usage of neutral pronouns and the avoidance of gendered job descriptions. This change should be rooted in society, concerning gender diversity and normalises equality in people's language throughout diversity.

The purpose of using inclusive language in this study is to address the concerns or issues regarding equal treatment, responsiveness, and the feeling of acceptance which are important aspects of culture and equality thus working towards eradicating prejudice in various social contexts. This may involve the use of politically correct language, cultural sensitivity, and taking into consideration a word's effect on different people within a population.

Gender-free writing otherwise referred to as genderless writing, is a form of writing and speaking where one avoids associating gender with people. For instance, some gendered occupations include ‘policeman’ and ‘stewardess’ which are salient with gender-neutral terms such as ‘police officer’ and ‘flight attendant.’ Other terms are also often linked to gender; ‘actor’ and ‘actress’ can be equally termed as ‘actor’ regardless of gender. Such words as “chairman” that used to contain the component “-man” which meant a person regardless of her/ his gender have changed in the eyes of some to gender-specific. Populist method of crafting phrases entails the use of “husband and wife” instead of “man and wife. Some examples of suppressing collective use of terms in English include using specific “they” for uncertain individuals and using gender-neutral words such as “humans,” “people,” or “humankind” instead of “man” or “mankind”.

In a report incorporated by SCERT, Delhi, a study was conducted to produce a gender audit of textbooks recommended in Delhi government schools. A total of 53 textbooks were selected for gender audit, which includes all subjects from different levels. Based on the observations, the committee suggested that the use of language throughout the books and manuals should be gender inclusive and gender-neutral as per the requirement of the text, with picturized examples and illustrations. The committee also suggests the inclusion of transgender persons in textbooks.

The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (LBSNAA), 2022, incorporated a gender-inclusive communication guide that discusses gender-neutral inclusivity at all levels from education to profession. This 100-page guide discusses the necessity of awareness of the importance and practices to implement gender-inclusive communication.

The approach of this study entails the implementation of gender-neutral language and policies in teacher education curricula and teaching-learning practices. These range from preparing future teachers on the use of appropriate language in and out of the classrooms, including using appropriate pronouns and terms that are sensitive to gender minorities, and fostering policies that allow future teachers to challenge stereotypically gendered texts and behaviours in classrooms.

For this study, the data have been collected from the Teacher education students residing in Srinagar city of Garhwal, Uttarakhand. The choice to select these students was made because they are the future teachers, and the age group chosen is aware of the current scenario of Gender equality.

The present research study aims to investigate the following two interrogatives: firstly, “the awareness of pupil teachers towards gender-neutral language” and secondly “, how gender-neutral language promotes gender inclusivity in teacher training institutes”. The present paper is categorised as follows: first, the theoretical background of the study is discussed, followed by the methodology used. Then, the results of the study are presented along with the discussion and implications. In the end, the report concludes with the shortcomings of the study and recommendations for future research.

Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework provides a summary of reports and research that were carried out to implement changes in the field of education, govt. policies, and social constructions towards different genders of society. Literature reviews related to ‘Gender Neutral language’(GNL) and ‘Gender inclusivity’ are provided below. A study conducted by (Cohen, 2023) explores the impact of gender-neutral language on the performance of women and men in high-stakes exams. This was longitudinal research. This research used a natural experiment conducted by Israel’s National Institute of Testing and Evaluation (NITE), which administers the Psychometric Entrance Test (PET). The study put forward a transition from addressing test-takers in the singular masculine to addressing them in the plural masculine, the findings started in 2012 and the experiment and observation were taken into consideration from 2000 to 2012. It suggests that gendered language may result in stereotype threats particularly affecting women's performance in areas where they are stereotypically perceived to underperform.

Vizcarra-Garcia (2021) conducted a qualitative study to examine higher education teachers' perceptions of adopting gender-inclusive language in the classroom. Based on interviews with nine teacher educators, two major themes were identified: (1) the importance of using unbiased language in instruction and (2) strong support for gender-inclusive language adoption. The teachers believed that gender-inclusive language would promote equality, sensitivity, and inclusivity, enhancing student participation. Additionally, they recognized that it reflects current educational trends and is a part of their responsibility to integrate them into their teaching practices.

Levi C. R. Hord (2016) conducted a study to explore the challenges faced by queer and transgender individuals in societies structured around gendered language. It addresses the need for gender-neutral alternatives and investigates

the assimilation of such language within different grammatical gender systems, focusing on English, French, German, and Swedish. Findings reveal significant disparities in transgender experiences, with certain identities nearly impossible to express in grammatically gendered languages. The study emphasizes the vital role of language in shaping lived experiences and advocates for context-specific activism in the ongoing struggle for representation and against oppression.

The article, by Kadija Kabba (2011), examines the role of gender-neutral language as a crucial tool for achieving precision, clarity, and unambiguity in drafting legislation. Despite criticism from scholars and experts regarding its alleged shortcomings, the article contends that gender-neutral language is essential, particularly in the pursuit of gender equality and linguistic precision. The essay argues that gender-neutral language serves as a valuable tool by promoting gender specificity in pronouns, reducing redundancies, and producing concise and unambiguous legislative drafts. Acknowledging potential ambiguities in pronoun use, especially in sentences with two actors, the article emphasises that achieving clarity, precision, and unambiguity should take precedence over simplicity, elegance, or eloquence in legislative drafting.

Overall, the gap in all the above-mentioned theories and practices is the common criteria: gender-neutral language and its awareness. Its initiation and promotion in India are far more important for the equal development of women in all professional sectors, which can reduce biases and gender differences. Teachers and trainees are the cornerstone of effective instruction, and they must take the lead in this process. Teacher education institutes must revise their curriculum to incorporate innovative strategies that eliminate gender-specific language. This proactive approach will enhance inclusivity and foster a more equitable learning environment.

Research Methodology

The present study was done with a qualitative research approach. The study is done on 30 pupil teachers studying in Birla Campus Srinagar Garhwal Uttarakhand. It was mainly initiated to gather the understanding and awareness of the trainees during and after their training course. The demographic information collected comprised Age, Gender, Programme enrolled, locality, and educational qualification.

Based on the observation a semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire was prepared. The questions made were designed based on four dimensions- awareness, attitude, challenges and barriers, and educational environment. The tool comprises 16 open-ended questions to collect unbiased and fair responses from the participants. Purposive sampling was used to collect data and to select the participants from 2 different courses (B.Ed. and M.Ed.) for variability.

The study is limited to the Department of Education, as the objective is to raise awareness among student teachers. This will focus on addressing the shortcomings that can be improved in teacher training programs. After obtaining consent from the participants, the distribution of questionnaires was done and responses were collected. The size of the present study is 30 (13 males and 17 females). It included both undergraduate and postgraduate students. The demographic characteristics of the samples in the present study are illustrated below in the table. (Table I)

Demographic Profile	Description	No. of Respondents	Frequency
Age	21-23	10	33%
	24-26	20	66%
Gender	Male	13	43.3%
	Female	17	56.6%
Educational Qualification	Undergraduate	22	73.3%
	Postgraduate	08	26.6%
Locality	Rural	09	30%
	Urban	21	70%

Table 1: Demographic profile of the respondents (n=30)

According to Marshal et al. (2013), a sample size of 40 is appropriate if researchers can commit sufficient time and attention to thoroughly analysing the results. Some researchers argue that a sample size can be as small as 20 or larger. Conversely, Trotten (2012) indicated that there is no definitive limit on sample size; it ultimately relies on the researchers' diligence and attentiveness.

A pilot test was conducted with a small subset of students to assess the clarity of the questions and the time required to complete the questionnaire. Based on their feedback, minor adjustments were made to ensure that the instrument would yield valid and reliable data.

Participants were given clear instructions on how to complete the questionnaire, and they were encouraged to answer honestly and thoroughly. To ensure the quality of responses, participants were assured that their answers would be kept confidential and used strictly for academic purposes.

The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were maintained. Each participant was assigned a unique code during data analysis, ensuring their identities were protected. Furthermore, no sensitive information was disclosed in the study, and the data collected was used solely for academic purposes. By adhering to ethical guidelines, the study ensured participants' protection and the integrity of the research process.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Awareness and conceptual understanding

The respondents were asked to answer questions related to awareness and understanding of the gender-neutral language which helped interpret the recognition and importance of the gender-neutral terms. Out of the 30 respondents, few were able to define gender-neutral language using terms such as "Prejudice stereotypes", and "Free from biased terminology" in the first open-ended question, such as

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"Gender-neutral language is a way to address all the genders using such terms that are free of any prejudice stereotype or already established gender roles."

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"Gender-neutral language is a language which avoids using or referencing to any sex-related terms"

As above one of the respondents used phrases like "male dominant society" and "hinders the process of development" suggesting that the respondent perceives gender roles as unequal, with women being disproportionately restricted.

The respondent argues that social constraints on women limit their ability to participate effectively in the development process. These constraints are likely related to traditional gender roles, expectations, and discriminatory practices such as the use of gender-biased terms that demonstrate the example of a man in a profession.

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"We are in a male-dominated society that hinders the process of development where females can't contribute to the development process efficiently due to social constraints. The language that does not support/encourage any kind of gender stereotype or biases is gender-neutral language."

The respondent introduces gender-neutral language as a potential solution to counteract gender stereotypes. This language is described as one that avoids reinforcing gender biases and promotes equality. The above responses show that pupil-teachers are aware of gender-neutral language and understand the concept of using it in educational settings.

Institutional promotion and inclusivity

Responses were collected from pupil teachers to formulate a perspective on gender-neutral language concerning institutions and its promotion in educational settings. The respondents characterised their experiences as largely positive regarding the integration of inclusivity and reported not encountering discrimination based on gender. Further few of them mentioned that the institution has appointed great teachers who are well aware of inclusivity and gender-neutral language in education.

“Our institution has appointed great teachers who are aware of gender inclusivity. They also treat all students equally and provide opportunities and guidance for both genders.”

Some of the participants also mentioned the inclusion of activities that promote gender- inclusivity such as street plays, and poster-making. The majority have answered that institutions promote respectful and empathetic behaviour towards each other. Over the years, many studies have been conducted on the importance of gender neutrality in the educational environment. One of them was carried out in 2021 by Europe's leading online language school Lingoda among language learners on the platform. The participants were asked questions regarding their familiarity with gender-inclusive language and the importance they placed upon it overall, as well as in different aspects of life, the educational context being one of them. The results showed that more than half of the respondents in the USA agree that gender-inclusive language is important in the educational system, be it school, college or academia. An interesting finding is that those who more than anyone believed in the value of inclusive language in the educational system were the younger members of those interviewed: 61% of participants up to 30 years of age agreed, compared to 54% of 31-45-year-olds and 48% of 46+-year-olds.

Positive Outcomes

Enhanced participation of peers and colleagues is important in promoting any social change. When the participants were asked about using gender-neutral language affecting interaction in educational settings the responses were so clear in promoting open communication on various social topics. The responses also include that the discussion also focuses sometimes on the reduction of biased communication and promoting an inclusive environment. When interacting with peers, the conversation does not feel demeaning to any specific gender. And removal of gender bias terms makes people more comfortable in having further discussions.

Teaching gender-inclusive language in the educational environment requires a combination of several elements. Curricula and textbooks prove to be fundamental to ensuring avoiding discrimination, as well as teachers and specialists, who are to be trained and educated about the topic in order for them to transmit it to their audience.

Strategies to reduce bias and develop societal influence

Language plays a role in how people organize their beliefs about gender, then it stands to reason that differences in the gendered language systems across different cultures could play a role in societal differences in beliefs, attitudes, and behavioural practices about the role and status of men and women (Prewitt-Freilino et al. 269). The population has responded to some strategies such as training and awareness programs to promote gender-neutral language and its inclusivity in education. Training to teacher educators for educational growth and professional development as the strategies can influence nations' growth and development in education sectors. Some have proposed that inclusive gender practices should be prioritized in the development and design of curricula, allowing for more gender-neutral lesson planning and content delivery. Furthermore, it is essential to revise pedagogical practices and methodologies in teacher training to encourage the use of neutral terminology. According to the 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report, it reflects what is meant to be taught, which can be intended as the content, and what is meant to be learned, so to say the goals. Moreover, a curriculum needs to be consistent with how it is to be taught (pedagogical methods) and learned (tasks), as well as with the materials to support learning (e.g. textbooks, computers) and the methods to assess learning (e.g. examinations, projects).

CONCLUSION

The study revealed a growing awareness and positive attitudes towards gender-neutral language among pupil teachers. However, the findings also highlight significant challenges in its widespread implementation, particularly due to cultural resistance and institutional limitations. To address these challenges, teacher education programs must be reformed to integrate gender-neutral language into curricula, training, and institutional policies. By doing so, future educators will be better equipped to create inclusive, equitable learning environments that reflect and respect the diversity of all students. The study concludes that integrating gender-neutral language into teacher education is essential for building a future educational workforce that values inclusivity and respect towards other genders in society. Furthermore, successful implementation requires a multi-faceted approach within TEIs. By fostering awareness, equipping students with practical skills, and promoting a supportive institutional culture, TEIs can play a transformative role in creating classrooms that respect and embrace diversity.

Limitations and Future Scope of the Study

Certain shortfalls of this research are listed. The study focused on the student population from teacher training institute, and the data was collected from 30 students ages ranging from 24 to 30 years old. Thus, the study was limited to a specific age group. It is expected that if the age range was increased then the result might have been different., The methodology used was an open-ended survey questionnaire and face-to-face interviews to collect unbiased responses. This limited number and regional selection might not interpret better research proposals, suggesting longitudinal research for further studies in this field. The study is limited to a single region, including students from the Birla Campus of Hemvati Nandan Bahuguna Garhwal University in Srinagar, Garhwal, Uttarakhand, which restricts the consideration of regional differences.

Implications for Teacher Education

The findings from this study highlight the urgent need for reform in teacher education programs to foster gender inclusivity and the use of gender-neutral language. To better prepare future educators for diverse classroom settings, curriculum reforms in teacher education should emphasize the following:

Incorporation of Gender Studies: Integrating gender studies and training on gender-neutral language as core components of teacher education courses to develop an inclusive understanding among student-teachers.

Practical Application Through Workshops: Offering practical workshops and simulations where student-teachers can practice using gender-neutral language in various instructional scenarios, reinforcing their ability to apply inclusive language effectively.

Ongoing Professional Development: Providing continuous professional development opportunities to help educators stay updated on evolving gender norms and inclusive language practices, fostering adaptability and inclusivity in the classroom.

Supportive Institutional Policies: Establishing and reinforcing institutional policies that support the use of inclusive language in schools, with strong administrative and peer support systems to ensure a positive and consistent approach to gender-neutral language.

Furthermore, this study calls for a collaborative effort among educational institutions, policymakers, and society to ensure that gender-neutral language becomes embedded in educational practices. Such initiatives not only raise awareness but also challenge ingrained biases, promoting an equitable educational environment for all.

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