

## **Sexist Language and Its Impact on Second Language Learning**

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### **Abstract**

This article discusses the issue of language used in classroom as medium of teacher-students communication related to sexism in linguistic expression. This discussion is scooped on merely theoretical overview on sexist language which then is connected to the process of second language acquisition. This article is triggered by a statement that is very disturbing that a female student keeps using the word “he” to refer to herself. What has happened to her language learning process? This article tries to reveal possibility in discovering that problem. The result shows that teacher holds very important role in creating environment that learners possess their second language. When a teacher keeps using a certain language, learners imitate the teacher’s habit of only using certain words. So that teacher’s language choice should be seen as something important.

**Keywords:** *second language acquisition, sexist language, teacher, environment.*

### **1. The Background**

Language is functioned commonly as a means of communication. People keep in touch with others through language, even though they are in distance. People deliver or share ideas through language without any barrier as the language used is possessing mutual intelligibility. People are still able to obtain specific information through understanding lingua franca as language for uniting people of different language background. Finally, language is like glue for people whose need is interaction with others.

As a means of communication, all language users are assumed to possess the language well. Where and when the communication takes place, people do not have anything to adjust. Who is speaking and to whom he/she is speaking are not something troubling. Those mean that all communication run well with the well-used language.

However, that condition sometimes does not meet its requirements. Especially when the participants involved in a conversation are learners. Learners are still in the process of acquiring their new language. Thus, there are some factors influencing their process. One of the processes that will be elaborated more is the role of teacher and the process of acquisition. This idea was inspired by a statement in a website, namely:

*“I have just attended a conference in Morocco about the gender issue and among the things that attracted my attention a paper presented by one of the participants called "She is a man". The teacher explained that one of her students (a girl) addressed herself as "he" because the teacher keeps all the time addressing them as boys. So, I think that our students become aware of it” (Mustapha Boughoulid),  
source: <http://eteacher.ning.com/>*

The statement seems to be very simple and some people ignore it, but my attention was attracted on several last words that how important a teacher is.

## **2. Second Language Acquisition and Language Learning**

Language is a tool used for people to communicate. As parents who have children, they unintentionally or intentionally teach their children to speak, to show their willing or want through words spoken. Parents will correct the children’s utterance when they say something unclear or wrong. Parents say many times the same words to let their children listen, understand, and reproduce those words appropriately. Therefore at the very beginning of life time, children have been taught how to communicate using language.

As the children grow older and as they have completely understood how to communicate with their mother tongue, they start to learn other languages. The other language learned could be stated as “second language”. As Mitchell and Myles (2004: 5) mention that “second languages are any languages other than the learner’s native language or mother tongue”.

Learning second language is probably done through formal and informal education. Learning language in a formal environment with the consequence of very well planned and systematic material could be conducted in a school or a classroom based-learning. As the result, some prefer to label this condition as

“learning”. On the contrary, learning language in informal environment with unstructured material is done when learners directly learn from the community that use this language learned, and some label it as “acquisition” (Mitchell and Myles, 2004: 6). In this article, I will not contend for the right term of learning or acquisition, but I will use “learning” as I include “teacher” in my discussion. Teacher is identical with learning in school and formal environment.

There are some other factors influencing the success of language learners. Krashen proposes some terms as factors such as monitor, attitude and aptitude, environment, mother tongue, neurological aspect, and habit (Krashen, 1981: iii). Brown (1987) groups the factors into two big headings, personality factors (such as self-esteem, anxiety, inhibition, motivation, etc.) and sociocultural factors (such as cultural stereotype, acculturation, social distance, etc.). In line with Brown, Ellis (2008) broadly classifies two factors influencing language learners, internal and external, covering intelligence, aptitude, personality, motivation, anxiety, input, and interaction. From those factors, I select external factor focusing on environment, particularly on teacher’s role on students learning a language. I will then collaborate it with the concept of sexist language as I put on the title.

### 3. Teacher’s Role in Learning Language

Teacher is “a person who teaches in a school” (Reader’s Digest Word Power Dictionary, 2001: 1004). Teacher in this definition is the agent who does something, namely “teaching”. Therefore teaching is definitely possessed by teacher. Talking about teaching is not complete without stating learning. As could be seen in the following definition:

teach > *verb* (**past** and **past participle taught**) **1** impart knowledge to or instruct in how to do something, especially in school or as part of a recognised programme. **2** give instruction in (a subject or skill). **3** cause to learn by example or experience. **4** advocate as a practice or principle.  
source: Reader’s Digest Word Power Dictionary, 2001: 1004

It can be clearly proven that teaching could not be separated from learning. Brown (1987: 7) states that “teaching cannot be defined apart from learning.” He also mentions that when a teacher is teaching, the teacher should guide and

facilitate learning, enable the learners to learn, and set the conditions for learning. When the teacher has understood of how the learners learn, it gives clues of the style, approach, method, and techniques that are probably suitable for classroom action. Therefore, teacher holds important role in a class. This conclusion is strengthened by the statement that “Teacher is analogous to the builder, and just as the builder is ultimately responsible for the structure, the teacher is ultimately responsible for accomplishing the goals of a lesson” (Eggen and Kauchack, 1979: 13).

As teacher is responsible for the class, teacher build the communication through dialogue. “Most classroom business, whether to do with teaching the curriculum or managing groups of students, is mediated through dialogue” (Maybin in Llamas, Mullany, Stockwell, 2007: 157). The dialogue is constructed through asking-answer session. Teacher usually initiates the session by asking question, waiting for student’s response, and giving evaluation or feedback. Krashen chooses “teacher-talk” as the language used by teacher in classroom to do with giving exercises, explanation, and managing anything in relation to classroom management (1981: 121). From both terms mentioned by Maybin and Krashen, it creates a sequence in teacher-students’ communication.

By that fact, a teacher holds important role in a class. A teacher who plans the material and learning process is labeled as “...the speaker with institutional authority who selects and organizes the knowledge to be conveyed to the students” (Maybin in Llamas, Mullany, Stockwell, 2007: 158). A teacher is able to formulate the language choice within the handout (written) or during the sequence of dialogue (oral). Maybin also states that a teacher grasps and guides students’ attention to a particular topic, repeats it, and puts together the students’ response completely from the whole sequence of discussion (Llamas, Mullany, Stockwell, 2007: 158). Therefore, a teacher has his/her important role to students’ knowledge stored on mind because of the authority possessed and usually done with repetition.

#### 4. Sexist Language

Starting from digging out the definition of “sex”, I then move on showing its relation to language. Sex on *Oxford Advance Learner’s Dictionary* (Hornby, 1987:783) is clarified as:

**Sex** /seks/ *n* **1** being male or female: *What is its sex? Help them all, without distinction of race, age, or sex.* **2** males or females as a group. **3** [U] differences between males and females; consciousness of these differences: ‘sex antagonism. **4** [U] the activities surrounding, centering on and leading to coitus: *a film/novel with lots of sex in it: the ‘sex instinct: ‘sex appeal*, sexual attractiveness. **5**. [U] sexual intercourse: *have sex with sb.* □ *vt* [VP6A] determine the sex of. **sexed part adj** having a (specified) sexual nature: *highly/weakly~ed*, **sex-iess adj** neither male nor female; displaying neither masculine or feminine characteristics, ‘**sex-starved adj** (colloq) deprived of sexual gratification. **Sexy adj** (-ier, -iest) (colloq) of or about sex; sexually attractive.

The definitions about sex on that dictionary show clearly that sex is closely related to identifying people with “male” or “female”. It is proven by three of five definitions above that mention words male and female. Additionally, it is also strengthened by the verb form of this word which is meant for “determine”. So, I finally conclude that sex is talking about identifying (or determining) people with different terms. Those terms are male and female.

However to identify people, there should be criterion or criteria. In relation to identifying the terms labeled to people, determining sex is conducted through the genital organ, as it is shown on the definition number 4 and 5 which lead readers to grasp the implied message that sex is identical with “genital” or some use “sexual” organ. This organ definitely differs between male and female and it consequently brings people labeled as masculine or feminine.

Finally it can be summed up that sex is the identity of people with label “male” or “female” based on their genital organ which gives them different characteristic, masculine or feminine.

In relation to language, the word “sex” is derived by adding suffix “-ism” (noun) and “-ist” (adjective). Sexism (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/>) means “unfair treatment of people because of their sex; especially: unfair treatment of

women.” While Hornby in the same page of the definition of sex, defines sexism as,

**Sex-ism** /ˈseksɪzəm/n [U] unfair or unreasonable discrimination between the sexes; unreasonable maintaining of traditional sexual roles (e.g. that men are strong and women are weak). **sex-ist** /ˈseksɪst/adj of~ : *sexist attitudes; sexist words, e.g. baby, bird, chick, doll*, used to mean a woman. □ *n* person who displays or approves of ~ . ⇨ *male chauvinist* at chauvinism. (Hornby, 1987: 783)

The definition above fortifies the relation between sex and language, as that definition gives information that sexism and sexist are unequal treatment for people based on their sex that can be realized via attitudes or words (language). That definition also gives emphasis on unbalanced treatment for women. The term woman is the noun of female as it is written in the dictionary that woman can be 1. adult female human being: *men, women and children*, 2. female sex, 3. feminine character (Hornby, 1987: 990).

The relation between sex and language, which then I choose “sexist language” as the common term, has been the current topic that attracts people’s attention in recent years because this topic concerns over male and female equality (Crystal, 1992: 46). Some terms that are regarded to refer to only man are attached on some words, such as *the common man, chairman, businessman, fireman, etc.* Those examples are showing professions outside home done by men or male people. It implies that only men who should work and are able to do work outside their house. Implicitly, it shows that women should be at home. Women are excluded from men’s world. However, nowadays women are also participating in that men’s world. Therefore some neutral words are proposed to change those words ended with –man, for *the average person, chairperson, business executive/manager, fire fighter* respectively. Some words ended with certain suffix–ess, such as *stewardess* and *waitress* are also given alternatives, *flight attendant* and *food server* (Klein).

Though some are not aware of its usage, but learners who start acknowledging new language as the audience will get the impact. Jacobson states that “This is not about freedom of speech; at Penn(*Pennsylvania*), and in my class,

there is no rule insisting on gender-neutral language. This is an issue of audience and awareness”. As language is not only related to its natives, but also learners (as audience) who do not possess it as their native tongue, it is important to see sexist language as something matter.

### **5. Sexist Language in Classroom**

Language as medium of communication between teacher and students is an important aspect influencing the success of learning any academic subject. Teacher, as it has been clearly shown, has very significant position over students because teacher is the designer of classroom who organizes and executes plans of teaching and learning. Besides, teacher is the role model whom students imitate his/her behavior. Hence, teacher should care of the language used in classroom.

Learning language needs some steps. Usually students at the very beginning start to acquire speech, words, and grammatical structure, then apply them into broader sense of learning such as reading, writing, or speaking. In addition, when students bring them into action, they should build awareness in some nature or unusual appearance of language, such as black marks on printed version, or repetition in oral performance (Perera in Mesthrie, 2001:713). Those different treatments on some language codes bring great effect on the teaching and learning process.

Some theories of language acquisition and or second language acquisition propose some concepts of how languages are acquired. One of those theories influencing this discussion is behaviorism. Though some disagree of this conception as a whole process of acquiring language but, some key words used in this theory are being practiced by those, especially children, who start learning language. In this behaviorism, scientists believed that “learning language is the result of imitation, practice, feedback on success, and habit formation” (Lightbown and Spada, 2003: 9). Consequently, environment engages a certain role in the success of language learning. Environment is the place where learners “receive linguistic input from speakers ... and they form ‘associations’ between words and objects or events. These associations become stronger as experiences

are repeated. ... language development is viewed as the formation habits” (Lightbown and Spada, 2003: 35). Therefore, behaviorists relied the idea of learning language on the forming habit through imitations and practices which is much influenced by environment.

Environment in behaviorism is identical with speakers, as it is shown in Lightbown and Spada “Learners receive linguistic input from speakers in their environment...” (2003:35). I then bring this situation of environment in classroom, where speaker here is acted by teacher. As it has been elaborated that a teacher has big role in the process of language learning which creates environment that supports learners in achieving success in learning language. Teacher is the role model of learners. Learners tend to imitate what their teacher say to them, as it is proposed in behaviorism. Here is the chart showing their connection.

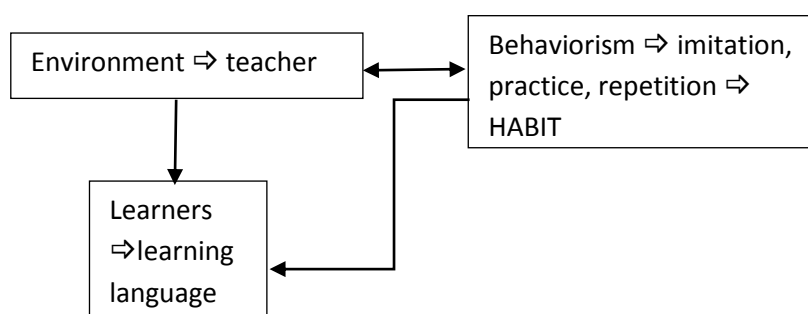


Chart 1. The teacher-learners connection in term of creating their habit in the process of language learning

This webbed idea is clearly understood. Learners as the center are influenced by environment (teacher), in which the process of learning is in the frame of behaviorism which creates learners’ habit. However, what then attracts my attention is the language choice of a teacher in teaching learners in classroom, which becomes the mirror of teacher and students.

Learners’ habit in imitating teacher’s words is something usual and common. Because of the repetition, students could store those words in their brain as brain is the organ where memory is kept for short or long period. As it has been written at the beginning part that there was a female student that kept using word “he” when she meant to refer to herself. It raises problem because she has a habit that linguistically and literally is not accepted as it does not fit the concept of



pronoun semantically. How could this happen? The fact shows that the teacher keeps using “he” **all the time** to address to female students.

Phrase **all the time** is the key words to refer to the learning process. As the process spending time results a habit, and the process is filled with the repetition of actions/words, then learners establish their usual behavior to practice/use them. In this article’s case, the teacher always uses the word “he” to address a female student, then she imitates her teacher’s “he”. Because of the frequency of using this “he”, it brings something usual and common without being aware of its meaning literally and semantically.

In term of the case I would like to explore, the word “he” that is spoken frequently by the teacher, in the conception of sexist language where he is assumed as masculine pronoun becomes the problem in teaching learning process. In sexist language point of view, many people feel that it is not fair because women seem to be excluded. Therefore, “This means that more and more people find the use of such a pronoun problematic” (Jacobson). Other source also mentions that sexist language becomes problem in writing skill and getting the solution of this problem is difficult (Klein). Therefore, sexist language should be regarded as something important for learners, especially for second language learners because they don’t fully feel the sense and the meaning of the words.

## **7. Conclusion**

Looking at the connection among headings, it can be drawn a conclusion that a teacher should choose and or use various words in order that students or learners have wide perspective or rich vocabularies. A second language teacher should be aware of his/her language choice and use the words appropriately. Additionally, teacher should not repeat a word or some words frequently or all the time to avoid creating learners’ habit in imitating the inappropriately repeated words. The following chart will give clearer answer of the whole discussion.

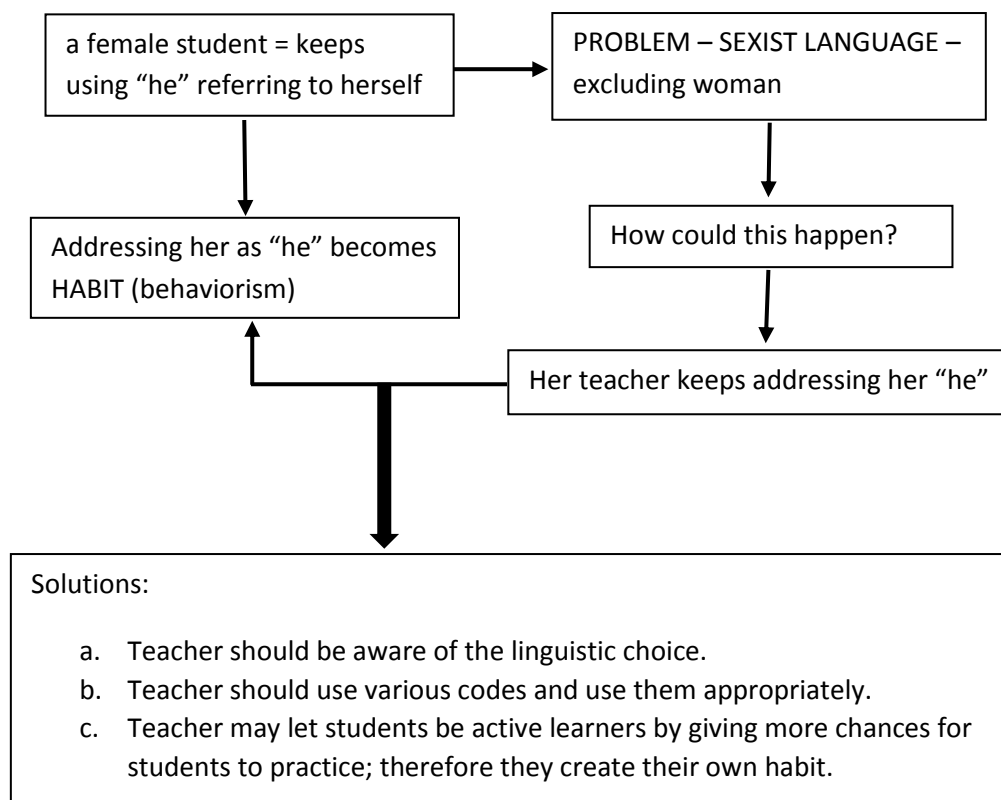


Chart 2. The solution chart of the problem discussed (a statement as “problem” – sexist language and solution)

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