

GENDER AWARENESS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AS A RESILIENCE STRATEGY FOR COMPLEX AND UNCERTAIN PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract: *As professional environments today are becoming less stable, predictable, or straightforward, individuals are increasingly expected to communicate effectively across differences and adapt their thinking and behaviour in real time. However, language teaching in general, and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching in particular, has been slow to engage with the kinds of critical competencies that these environments demand. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that gender-aware approaches to English language teaching offer one meaningful response to this gap. The paper focuses on the importance of helping learners become aware of the fact that language shapes and reflects gender relations. Thus, they start questioning assumptions and develop a more flexible relationship with meaning itself. All of these can be regarded as more than linguistic skills; they are foundations of adaptive professional communication that prepare learners for uncertain and demanding professional realities. The paper draws on feminist pedagogy and critical language teaching to show that gender awareness can indeed be woven into EFL curricula in ways that go beyond content addition.*

Keywords: critical pedagogy, EFL, gender awareness, professional communication, resilience

1. Introduction

The contemporary workplaces have become more and more unstable, or what recent scholarship has coined as the BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible) workplace. They are increasingly characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity [1].

In this context, people are expected not only to possess technical competence but also to be able to meet the requirements of cultural differences and manage ambiguous communication. In other words, individuals should possess the necessary skills to question inherited assumptions and adapt their understanding in real time. Yet, English language teaching, despite its stated commitment to preparing learners for professional contexts, has largely focused on transactional competencies (such as email

writing, presentation skills, or meeting management) while neglecting the critical, reflective capacities that underpin adaptive communication.

This paper argues that gender-aware EFL teaching offers a practical entry point into precisely these capacities because, when learners are invited to examine how language not only reflects but also constructs and challenges gender norms, they learn how to question naturalized assumptions and recognize the contingency of meaning. Thus, they can tolerate interpretive uncertainty. bell hooks notes that “[t]he classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy” [2, p. 12], a space where established categories can be denaturalized and alternative ways of meaning-making can emerge. Consequently, gender awareness in language teaching is not about adding

diverse content to the syllabi; it is about cultivating a mode of attention that prepares learners for the interpretive demands of complex professional environments.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Feminist Pedagogy as Denaturalization

Feminist pedagogy was articulated by theorists such as hooks [2] and Freire [3]. According to them, feminist pedagogy centres on the practice of making visible what has been naturalized. Critical consciousness (*conscientização*, as proposed by Freire) refers to a process through which the learners come to the understanding that all social arrangements are constructed by societal norms rather than given. According to Freire, “Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming” which means that they are “unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” [3, p. 84]. This awareness of individuals as “unfinished” beings aligns precisely with the demands of uncertain environments, where fixed knowledge gives way to adaptive capacity.

Particularly relevant in this context is Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity [4], developed at the beginning of the 1990s. Butler argues that gender is not the result of a person’s internal identity or self but the result of a “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts...that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance. [4, p. 45]. This means that gender is based on a set of constructs provided by the traditional norms of patriarchal societies, and it is learned throughout life. For language learners, this insight offers a valuable analytical framework: if gender is produced through repeated linguistic acts, then language becomes a site where gender norms can be both reinforced and challenged. Examining gendered language patterns thus becomes an exercise in recognizing constructed categories, a skill directly transferable to professional contexts

where assumptions about culture, hierarchy, or expertise should be questioned and renegotiated.

2.2. Critical Language Awareness (CLA)

Critical language awareness (CLA) was first theorized by Deborah Cameron in *Verbal Hygiene* (1995) and Alastair Pennycook in his book *Critical Applied Linguistics: A Critical Introduction* (2001), and it extends linguistic analysis into the realm of power relations. Pennycook argues that “a critical approach to language teaching needs to problematize the assumption that language is a neutral medium of communication” [5, p. 7]. Similarly, Cameron’s work demonstrates that prescriptive norms of language (the rules about correct language usage) often serve not only to reflect social norms, but also to police them and to set gender boundaries [6]. She observes that verbal hygiene is “not, as we might suppose, a trivial or peripheral phenomenon, but a central aspect of how human subjects regulate their linguistic behavior and that of others” [6, p. 1]. According to this perspective, it is important to create opportunities for learners to interact in situations that require them to examine gendered language prescriptions (e.g., why certain terms are considered ‘appropriate’ for women but not for men).

When learners examine how professional registers encode masculine norms, they develop a metacognitive awareness of language as a regulatory system that builds not only gender awareness but also resilience. In professional contexts, resilience is not defined as merely emotional robustness; it involves cognitive flexibility and the capacity to tolerate ambiguity and recognize multiple valid perspectives on a single situation.

This claim is supported by Jane Sunderland’s work on gendered discourses in language teaching [7]. According to her research, language classrooms routinely reproduce binary gender categories through a series of actions such as teacher talk, textbook representations, and interaction

patterns in the classroom. However, if these patterns are made explicit to the learners, they eventually develop what Sunderland calls “discourse awareness”, or the ability to recognize how language constructs social categories: “Gendered discourses do not simply reflect pre-existing gender differences; they constitute them. The question for language teachers is not whether to address gender, but how to make visible the constitutive work that language performs” [7, p. 23]. This means that once learners grasp that language actively shapes the categories through which we understand the world, they can acquire the capacity to question taken-for-granted frameworks.

Sara Mills extends this argument by showing that gendered language patterns intersect with professional hierarchies [8]. In her analysis of workplace communication, she demonstrates that “doing femininity” and “doing professionalism” are often constructed as incompatible within the organizational discourse. Women often face what she calls a “double bind”, a construct which refers to the fact that adopting stereotypically feminine communication styles means being perceived as less competent, while adopting a masculine style can be perceived as violating gender norms [8, p. 141]. Teaching learners to recognize these contradictory demands equips them with the skills necessary to navigate similar contradictions in their own professional lives.

3. A Framework for Curriculum Integration

Integrating gender awareness into EFL curricula requires more than adding supplementary content. It involves redesigning pedagogical practices to foreground questions of meaning-making, power, and interpretive agency.

Cameron’s work about gender demonstrates how popular claims about gender differences in language use (e.g., women are collaborative, men are competitive; women apologize excessively, men interrupt) are

rarely supported by empirical evidence yet powerfully shape both self-perception and institutional practice. Cameron notes that “the real damage done by Mars and Venus is not that it is inaccurate, but that it is self-fulfilling” [9, p. 160].

Binary thinking – the reduction of complex phenomena to *either/or* categories – is a common response to cognitive overload, but it is precisely what learners must resist in complex professional environments. Gender provides an ideal domain for developing this capacity, as contemporary understandings of gender increasingly reject simple binaries in favour of recognition of diversity, fluidity, and intersectionality.

Mary Talbot argues that language teaching must move beyond treating gender as a stable variable and instead examine how gender intersects with other social categories such as race, class, sexuality, and age. This helps produce diverse subject positions: “Gender cannot be abstracted from other dimensions of identity and power. Any analysis of gendered language that ignores this intersectionality risks reproducing the very essentialisms it seeks to challenge” [10, p. 8].

It is also worth mentioning Norton’s theory of investment in language learning, which emphasizes that learners are never passive recipients of linguistic knowledge but active negotiators of identity and power [11]. She argues that “language learners who may be marginalized in one setting may be highly valued in another” [11, p. 45] and that recognizing this variability enables learners to position themselves across contexts. Gender-aware pedagogy extends this insight by inviting learners to experiment with linguistic choices that challenge normative expectations.

Integrating gender awareness into EFL curricula requires reconsidering both materials and teacher preparation. Coates notes that “the absence of explicit attention to gender in language teaching materials does not mean that gender is absent; it means that gender operates implicitly, reproducing

dominant assumptions without examination” [12, p. 198]. Materials designers must move beyond token representation (such as adding images of women in professional roles) toward activities that genuinely interrogate how language produces gender categories. Equally important is teacher development. Language teachers are not automatically equipped to facilitate discussions of gender, power, and identity. Professional development must address not only content knowledge but also pedagogical strategies for managing potentially contentious classroom discussions. Teachers need support in creating spaces where learners can question assumptions – including their own – without defensiveness or ideological prescription.

This pedagogical challenge returns us to hooks’ foundational insight about education as practice of freedom: “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” [2, p. 13]. Gender-aware language teaching, approached in this spirit, is not about imposing particular conclusions but about creating conditions where learners can develop the reflective capacities that allow them to cope with uncertain professional environments.

While the theoretical framework outlined so far provides a foundation for integrating gender awareness into EFL curricula, empirical validation of its effectiveness remains essential. Future implementation should include systematic assessment of learning outcomes across multiple dimensions, such as:

- linguistic competence (measured through standard proficiency assessments);
- critical consciousness (assessed through reflective writing, portfolios, and discourse analysis tasks);
- professional adaptability (evaluated through simulated workplace communication scenarios).

Norton and De Costa [13] argue that identity-focused pedagogies require research methodologies that capture both linguistic and social dimensions of learning. Longitudinal studies tracking learners’ professional trajectories would be particularly valuable in demonstrating whether gender-aware pedagogy indeed correlated with enhanced resilience in BANI workplace contexts [14].

Such empirical work would strengthen the evidence base for gender-aware approaches while identifying contextual factors that facilitate or constrain their effectiveness.

4. Practical Applications: Classroom Activities

The theoretical framework outlined above can be operationalized through specific classroom activities that integrate gender awareness into language skill development. The following activities are designed for intermediate to advanced EFL learners and can be adapted across professional contexts.

• Discourse analysis of job advertisements

Aim: to develop critical awareness of gendered language in professional contexts while building vocabulary for employment

Procedure: Learners work in small groups to analyse authentic job ads from various sectors for gendered language patterns: adjectives associated with masculine/feminine stereotypes, implicit assumptions about work-life balance, etc. Groups rewrite the ads using gender inclusive language and discuss how these changes might affect applicant pools.

• Counter-narrative writing

Aim: to challenge dominant narratives in order to help students develop voice and agency in professional writing.

Procedure: Learners read media articles, case studies, or corporate communications that implicitly reinforce gender stereotypes. Their task is to identify implicit assumptions about gender and professional competence, then write a response that challenges these assumptions while maintaining a

professional tone. This activity develops both critical reading and the capacity to articulate alternative perspectives where the dominant narratives may need to be questioned.

- **Portfolio**

Aim: to develop awareness of personal communication strategies and their relationship to gender norms.

Procedure: Learners build a portfolio over several weeks, documenting their professional communication in English. For each entry, they write a reflective commentary analysing their strategic choices: *Why did they use ambiguous language in a certain email? How did they position themselves during a certain presentation? What assumptions about professional communication determined their choices?*

The portfolio becomes a site for developing awareness: as learners move from unconscious reproduction of norms, they increase their communication skills.

However, these classroom activities represent pedagogical interventions whose effectiveness may vary significantly depending on contextual factors such as institutional culture and administrative support for critical pedagogy, as well as teacher preparation and confidence in facilitating discussions of gender. All these propositions require systematic testing across diverse educational contexts, learner populations, and professional domains, as Mercer and Gregersen [15] emphasize in their work on teacher wellbeing and adaptive capacity.

Menard-Warwick [16] documents how English language teachers navigate a “discursive faultline” between institutional expectations and critical pedagogical goals, suggesting that gender-aware approaches may face resistance in contexts where such work is perceived as ideologically controversial.

This framework draws primarily on scholarship from Western contexts so cultural contexts where gender may be

differently understood and learner readiness to engage with potentially challenging content, are also worth mentioning. Shin and Crookes [17] demonstrate that critical pedagogy in EFL requires careful adaptation to local contexts, particularly in settings where discussing social issues openly may conflict with educational norms. Angouri and Baxter [18] provide updated frameworks for understanding how gender is constructed differently across cultural contexts.

In terms of measuring resilience in professional communication, we must note some methodological challenges since traditional language proficiency assessments may not capture the adaptive capacities this framework aims to develop. New assessment instruments would need to be designed and validated, potentially including: scenario-based assessments measuring learners’ capacity to cope with ambiguous communication situations, or discourse analysis tasks.

5. Conclusions

This paper has argued that gender awareness in English language teaching functions as more than content enrichment; it operates as a mode of thinking that cultivates resilience in complex professional environments. When learners examine how language shapes gender relations, they develop transferable cognitive capabilities, such as the ability to question naturalized assumptions, tolerate interpretive ambiguity, and adapt their understanding. These are precisely the competencies demanded in contemporary BANI professional settings.

The framework and activities proposed in this paper offer practical entry points for curriculum integration, demonstrating that gender-aware pedagogy need not be abstract or ideologically prescriptive. Rather, it can be grounded in authentic professional communication tasks that develop both linguistic competence and critical consciousness.

The underlying argument is simple but consequential: teaching learners to think

critically about gender in language is also teaching them to be more resilient. In an era when professional success increasingly depends on the capacity to navigate difference and uncertainty, language teaching that develops this capacity is not peripheral but essential. Gender awareness, approached not as ideological imposition but as critical inquiry, prepares learners for the interpretive demands of their professional futures.

However, this paper represents a starting point rather than a conclusion. While the framework analysed assumes that developing critical consciousness about

gender in language will transfer to broader adaptive capacities in professional contexts, empirical demonstration of such transfer remains necessary. Future research should examine whether and how skills develop through gender-aware language pedagogy and manifest in learners' actual professional communication practices.

Despite these limitations, the analysis proposed in this paper offers a theoretically coherent and practically actionable starting point for integrating critical gender work into EFL curricula in ways that address documented needs in contemporary professional contexts.

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