Stylistic differences in male and female undergraduate narratives: A content analysis in an EFL context

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Abstract: Writing skills are important for EFL learners, especially those in tertiary education where they are required to engage in English writing throughout their studies. While most English writing in tertiary education tends to be academic in nature, there are also narrative writings that are done by these students especially those who are majoring in English education or English literature. While there are many studies done on academic writing, there are few done on narrative writing. Therein the question lies as to if there are variations between male and female EFL students' styles in narrative writing, which might influence how these writings are perceived or even evaluated. Therefore, this study is conducted to probe into stylistic variations between male and female undergraduate learners in their EFL character-based narrative writing. It employed descriptive qualitative methodology by way of document-based analysis. The stylistic features framework introduced by Rubin and Greene (1992) was used to distinguish writing styles between male and female undergraduate EFL students. It was found that female students applied majority of 13 stylistic features while writing which consisted of different connectives and pronouns with intensifiers alongside de-intensifiers and proximals and auxiliaries of possibility plus demonstratives. This led to more coherent and expressive writing style. The expressions of moral lessons from male students appeared shorter and indirect while female students' responses were both thorough and clear conclusions. The study proves that gendered language patterns in EFL writing tasks remain dominant thus generating implications for teaching approaches which support different writing approaches.

Keywords: gender; narrative writing; stylistic features; EFL writing; qualitative analysis

1.   Introduction

Language learning success primarily depends on writing skill because students use it to share novel thoughts together with information analysis functions while improving their thinking competencies (Kim-Rich & Curwood, 2023; Rubin & Greene, 1992). Narrative writing stands distinct among academic forms because it unites creative storytelling with an organized structure (Carey et al., 2022; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006; Tannen, 1990). According to Rizkiawan (2023) character-based narrative writing makes students explore character development while also developing moral reasoning capabilities with emotional sensitivity.

English as a foreign language (EFL) context proves engaging because narrative writing demonstrates a student's linguistic abilities and their personal identify with sociocultural aspects and gender-related elements (Acar, 2023; Hyde, 2005). The process of writing in a foreign language asks learners to

handle both the structure of language alongside content logic while their strategic choices and personal writing approaches influence their outcomes (Argamon et al., 2003; Wei et al., 2023). That said, within the context of writing in a foreign language, the writer brings about with him/her not only his knowledge of the foreign language, but also his/her knowledge of his/her native language, his/her culture, and even gender roles. Gender operates as a social construction that influences communication styles in people leading to distinctive writing patterns in discourse (Kilby, 2023; Lakoff, 1973). This is especially so in cultures that view gender roles distinctly from one another where men and women are expected to use the language differently. But how do these people write in a foreign language (e.g., English) that might have different expectations of how people from different gender use the language?

This study investigates gender differences in stylistic features of narrative writing by undergraduate English Literature students in the context of a public university in Indonesia, from which these students are mostly Indonesians from different parts of the country but share many similar cultures and values and roles of gender. This research explores the linguistic feature utilization between male and female students along with their relationship to moral messaging through text analysis using Rubin and Greene (1992) linguistic framework. Analysis of these patterns in linguistic behaviors helps gender-based research and provides valuable insights to enhance writing training methods.

2. Literature review

The use of language demonstrates gender-based differences which researchers have thoroughly documented in both linguistic and sociolinguistic fields. Lakoff (1973) stated that women speak in a tentative manner with emotional words along with politeness, but men use direct assertive language. These gender-related communication patterns develop through social conditioning instead of biological factors because they stem from cultural norms during socialization experiences (Hyde, 2005). In their stylistic model Rubin and Greene (1992) identified sixteen language elements that characterize gender-based writing behaviors. The stylistic elements which characterize writing between male and female writers consist of egocentric sequences together with modal adjuncts and perceptual verbs as well as diverse connectives and personal pronouns alongside intensifiers and de-intensifiers with proximals and auxiliaries of possibility. The study showed that women writers in their group used connectives as well as pronouns in combination with expressive modifiers, but men writers preferred language features related to egocentric expressions and perception. According to Tannen (1990) the communicative orientation of females consists of affiliative and elaborative styles while males adopt self-oriented and factual approaches.

Multiple studies using the framework have established that EFL language learners demonstrate equivalent gender-based discourse patterns in their writing. A study by Argamon et al. (2003) demonstrated that female students created more linked and detailed writings which contained personal pronouns and connectives yet male students tended to insert more determiners and prepositions. The storytelling techniques of authors modify their written texts by simultaneously altering both their organizational patterns along with the narrative tone and reader involvement. Teaching writing to English as a foreign language student becomes more effective when teachers use knowledge about these gender-based language patterns Rizkiawan (2023).

Research about gender patterns in writing shows modest interest but sparse scholarly investigation exists for narrative L2 writing (Anggraini, 2023; Bai et al., 2020; Fernández-Fontecha, 2021). Character-based narratives serve as valuable investigative grounds because they need students to portray feelings and moral reasoning as well as develop character attributes (Allein et al., 2025; Nguyen & Crossan, 2022; van Krieken et al., 2017). The research uses a gender analytical approach to

analyze texts while creating new knowledge about these texts and meaningful suggestions for instructors (Saeidzadeh, 2023; Savitz et al., 2024).

3. Methods

A descriptive qualitative approach was applied to written text analysis for identifying stylistic patterns through this study. Document content analysis was employed because it allows researchers to discover profound linguistic characteristics within student compositions (Rubin & Greene, 1992). 20 character-based narrative texts in which ten of them were composed by male students, and the remaining ten were written by female students.

The data were composed of two parts, including the narrative story and the moral values within these stories. Each text contains 200-300 words in total. The study evaluated sixteen stylistic features from Rubin and Greene (1992), including egocentric sequences and modal adjuncts in addition to perceptual verbs and connectives (i.e., additive, causal, temporal, adversative, conditional) and first- and second-person pronouns as well as intensifiers and de-intensifiers and proximals and refusals and auxiliaries of possibility.

In analyzing the data, each text was read thoroughly while being marked where each stylistic feature appeared. A comparison of the category frequencies occurred between the male and female participant groups in this study. The focus was on analyzing the use of these features in teaching moral lessons because the narrative conveys both writer expression clarity and rhetorical choices and personal values (Tannen, 1990).

4. Results

The research data demonstrated noticeable differences between how male and female undergraduate students use EFL writing styles. Undergraduate male writers used more egocentric sequences beginning with phrases like "I think that…" in their texts. Undergraduates tend to present "I think that" or "I believe" at the start of sentences while demonstrating personal beliefs and internal thoughts according to Rizkiawan (2023; Rubin & Greene, 1992). Male writers tend to use narrative language techniques to establish themselves as storytellers who actively interpret and write the moral framework of their stories. Male writers frequently employed modal adjuncts which included "maybe" and "probably" according to the study conducted by (Argamon et al., 2003).

Male-authored texts manifested perceptual verbs to a greater extent than their female counterparts. The author employed phrases like "saw," "heard," or "felt" to create detailed scenes through sensory experiences (Rubin & Greene, 1992). A male student demonstrated a visual storytelling technique through his sentence that read "He saw the darkness growing thicker as he walked into the forest" (Rizkiawan, 2023). The written texts produced by female authors contained higher quantities of cohesive elements from the groups of additive, temporal and causal connectives. The writer achieved continuous narrative progression by employing conjunctions, such as "and," "because," "but," and "then" according to Rizkiawan (2023; Tannen, 1990). The writing of female students contained increased levels of personal pronouns because they frequently used both first-person (i.e., "I" and "we") and second-person (i.e., "you") which essentially generated reader involvement through emotional engagement (Argamon et al., 2003).

Women authors demonstrated stronger use of additive and causal plus temporal connectives across their authorial writing. Female students employed conjunctions like "and," "because," "but," and "then" correctly to develop lengthy narrative sequences with logical organization (Rizkiawan, 2023; Tannen,

1990). Female writers in their writing also used personal pronouns heavily, including first- and second-person pronouns to develop connections that enhanced reader involvement and emotional commitment (Argamon et al., 2003).

Female writers generated emotional force through narrative descriptions by employing intensifying lexemes, like "very," "really," and "so" as described by Lakoff (1973; Rubin & Greene, 1992). The combining of emotional expression with narrative tension occurs in this sentence through its phrasing as, "She was very scared but tried to stay calm." The author employed "a little" alongside "just a bit" as de-intensifiers for the purpose of nuanced tone modulation according to (Rizkiawan, 2023). Both minor and major intensity modifiers served to make the emotional spectrum within this text more complex. Female writers created reflective and expressive narratives by using proximals along with auxiliaries of possibility that included expressions like "might," "could," "may" (Rubin & Greene, 1992). This style of writing allowed writers to have multilayered speech patterns (Tannen, 1990).

The final lessons about morality which appeared in these narratives contained specific gender-based characteristics. The males among the student group chose to express the moral message through brief and subtly worded statements (Rizkiawan, 2023). The text "We must solve problems calmly" demonstrates an explicit practical lesson without additional commentary. Female writers expressed moral lessons through syntactically complex sentences that sometimes used conditional or causal structures according to Rizkiawan (2023; Rubin & Greene, 1992). The story illustrates this point by stating that acting kindly towards others even through their hurting us leads to personal serenity. The structural differences between male and female students indicate female students tend to incorporate elaborate interpretations into their moral messaging.

5.   Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate systematic and clear differences in the utilization of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing styles by male and female undergraduate students, while providing insightful information about the contribution of gender-specific language patterns to the construction of narratives and moral emotion expression. These findings not only confirm earlier theory (Rizkiawan, 2023; Rubin & Greene, 1992; Argamon et al., 2003; Tannen, 1990), but also contribute to what we know about how undergraduate students utilize language in the expression of identity, emotion, and moral reasoning.

One common pattern found was the egocentric perspective demonstrated in literature penned by male authors. Male authors have a preference to start a sentence with markers of personal opinion, including the use of phrases such as "I think that" or "I believe," thus making themselves a prominent figure in the text. This aligns with earlier research (Rizkiawan, 2023; Rubin & Greene, 1992) and portrays that male students usually attempt to claim personal authority or create a strong authorial voice. By doing so, they invite the reader to consider their testimonies as knowingly mediated and subjectively informative, rather than neutrally transcribed. Finally, male authors demonstrated more pronounced application of narrative practices that established their role as narrators.

The frequent use of modal adjuncts, words like "maybe" and "probably," is an effort to reduce certainty and provide scope for alternative understandings (Argamon et al., 2003), thereby adding to the story-like nature of their writing. Also, male-written stories featured a greater use of perceptual verbs (verbs like "saw," "heard," "felt"), which provided vivid sensory details for the reader. The instance "He observed the darkness intensifying as he advanced into the forest" (Rizkiawan, 2023) compellingly exemplifies this concept, consistent with the conclusions drawn by Rubin & Greene

(1992) that male authors frequently emphasize external, perceivable events in the construction of their narratives.

In comparison, women-authored texts manifested a different set of stylistic features. The utilization of cohesive devices, more specifically additive, temporal, and causal conjunctions, was more common among female authors. Connecting words like "and," "because," "but," and "then" were utilized with the purpose of creating smooth and logically coherent texts (Tannen, 1990). This stylistic feature indicates that female authors are concerned with the flow of narrative continuity and the comprehensibility of interrelations between ideas, thereby creating an improved accessible structure for readers. Furthermore, women authors presented a higher utilization of personal pronouns, particularly first-person ("I," "we") and second-person ("you") in this case, which enabled a mode of narrative relational depth and emotional engagement (Argamon et al., 2003). This pattern is in line with previous research showing that women authors' discourse is more likely to engage with the audience in terms of connection and empathy (Tannen, 1990). Through direct address to the reader or by presenting themselves as active story participants, women authors produce a higher level of dialogue sense and shared experience. Another key feature of female writing was its emotional expressivity. The frequent use of intensifying lexemes such as "very," "really," and "so" allowed female authors to infuse their narratives with emotional depth (Lakoff, 1973; Rubin & Greene, 1992). The example "She was very scared but tried to stay calm" illustrates how female writers combine emotional tension with narrative action. Moreover, the employment of de-intensifiers such as "a little" and "just a bit" facilitated a more nuanced modulation of tone (Rizkiawan, 2023), thereby enriching the emotional depth of the text. Furthermore, the utilization of proximals and modals of possibility including "might," "could," and "may" demonstrates a distinct female inclination toward multilayered discourse (Rubin & Greene, 1992; Tannen, 1990), which permits an allowance for ambiguity and contemplative reflection.

The strongest gendered difference was evident in articulation of moral teachings. Male writers typically articulated concise and pragmatic moral messages (e.g., "We must solve problems calmly"), presenting values in a direct and unambiguous manner (Rizkiawan, 2023). This tendency may reflect a cultural inclination towards assertiveness and practical guidance in male communication styles. In contrast, female writers conveyed moral lessons through syntactically complex, conditional, and causal structures, embedding their values within broader interpretive frameworks (Rizkiawan, 2023; Rubin & Greene, 1992). For instance, the sentence outlining the virtues of benevolence in adverse circumstances exhibits a gesture of empathy and moral consideration. This stylistic choice itself offers some indication that women authors are likely to foster contextual comprehension and ethical subtlety in preference to dogmatic moral dictates.

Overall, these results indicate that male and female undergraduate students have disparate communicative priorities when writing EFL. Male writers tend to employ a style defined by authorial presence, sensory detail, and utilitarian moral forthrightness, while female writers prefer a style that accommodates narrative coherence, affective engagement, and contemplative moral discussion. Such gender-based stylistic tendencies (Tannen, 1990; Lakoff, 1973) are reflective of broader sociolinguistic trends and suggest that EFL pedagogy would be more effectively served by a more gender-aware approach to teaching that enhances and stimulates both expressive lucidity and relational nuance in students' writing. Furthermore, these patterns also highlight the importance of pushing students to expand their stylistic repertoires. For instance, male students can be taught additional cohesive devices and emotional expression, whereas female students can be encouraged to try out sensory language and short-form moral framing. In developing a more diverse and balanced style, teachers can help all students enhance communicative competence and rhetorical flexibility in their EFL writing.

6.   Conclusion

The research investigated contrasting writing styles between male and female undergraduate students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in a public university in Indonesia. Analyzing documents using Rubin and Greene (1992) framework demonstrated that male students expressed their narratives with egocentric language and modal adjuncts and perceptual verbs which resulted in direct and personalized writing. The writing of female students diminished in directness instead displaying a tendency to use cohesive elements while incorporating expressive language with complex sentence patterns which created text with more precise linguistic detail (Rizkiawan, 2023).

The study helps researchers understand how academic EFL writers express gender-related patterns when they write narratives. The observed communication patterns match established gender studies but they simultaneously show the effects from pedagogical conditions and grammatical expectations (Hyde, 2005; Lakoff, 1973; Tannen, 1990). Educational writing instruction should provide students with multiple linguistic tools to promote stylistic diversity given these research findings (Rubin & Greene, 1992). Educational programs that promote student understanding of different writing styles together with teaching them versatility will enhance their abilities to write compelling narratives. Additional research opportunities exist to expand this work through larger and proportionate testing of participants or through longitudinal writing development research and additional studies involving participant responses to text stylistics and impact.

Author's declaration

Author contribution

Muhammad Alif Rizkiawan: conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, writing-original draft. **Abu Bakar Razali:** reviewing and editing-final manuscript. **Mohammad Owen**: reviewing and editing-discussion.

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Data availability

The authors state that the data of this study are available to access for educational purposes only by sending a request e-mail to the corresponding author. It is strictly prohibited to use the data for commercial and personal uses without any permission from the authors.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this research and publication.

Ethical clearance

This study only dealt with character-based narrative writing to analyze, thus did not involve human participants, animals, or any sensitive data requiring ethical approval

AI statement

This article is an original work of the authors without using AI tools for generating sentences and/or creating/editing table and figures presented in the manuscript.

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