

Gender-Based Lexical Perceptions in Saudi EFL Learners' Vocabulary Use

Nesreen Aalahmdi*

Department of Languages and Translation, Faculty of Art and Humanities, Taibah University, Madinah, Saudi Arabia

Mohammad Almoaily

Department of English, College of Language Sciences, 11451, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Fahad Almulhim

Department of English, College of Arts, King Faisal University, Hofuf, Saudi Arabia

Ali Alsaawi

Department of English, College of Education, Majmaah University, Al-Majmaah, Saudi Arabia

Hamza Alshenqeeti

Department of Languages and Translation, Faculty of Art and Humanities, Taibah University, Madinah, Saudi Arabia

Abstract—This study investigates gender-based differences in English vocabulary perception and production among Saudi EFL learners. Using a mixed-methods approach, it involved 80 participants (male and female) aged 18–55 and examined three areas: 1) gender differences in vocabulary perception, 2) variations in vocabulary production, and 3) patterns in vocabulary choices. Unlike prior research, this study found no significant gender differences in vocabulary perception or lexical variation. Participants of both genders demonstrated awareness of accents and dialects, highlighting the importance of adapting to evolving vocabulary. In vocabulary production, both males and females exhibited similar tendencies in intentional word selection and context-based adaptations. Although some studies suggest subtle gender differences, this research aligns with findings that gender-gap diversity may reduce such distinctions. Both genders expressed positive attitudes toward lexical variation, recognizing its value in enriching vocabulary and enhancing proficiency. Participants also showed familiarity with idiomatic expressions, informal language, technical terms, figurative language, and metaphors. Overall, the study contributes to sociolinguistics by addressing how gender-based language variation influences identity. It emphasizes that factors like education and social context may override traditional gender differences in language use. The findings encourage a focus on shared linguistic patterns rather than perceived gender disparities. Future research could explore metaphor comprehension and verbal fluency, examining links to cognitive abilities such as fluid intelligence. This study provides a comprehensive view of gender influences on vocabulary preferences and usage, offering valuable insights for sociolinguistics and second language acquisition research.

Index Terms—gender-based differences, lexical perception, productive vocabulary, Saudi EFL learners, vocabulary use

I. INTRODUCTION

Linguistics has long been established as the science of studying languages, aiming to understand language and its connections (Oviogun & Veerdee, 2019). Studying language as a societal phenomenon led to the emergence of sociolinguistics, which is concerned with the influence of social aspects such as ethnicity, religion, status, education, gender, and age on language use (Hasanah et al., 2019). Since language is a dynamic phenomenon that constantly changes (Belahcen & Ouahmiche, 2017), sociolinguists have focused on language variation and its connections with other social factors, such as gender.

Language is influenced by social variables and research has consistently demonstrated a relation between sociolinguistic contexts and language variation. According to constructionists, language cannot be separated from society as it reflects its reality (Wang et al., 2023). Contextual variation happens when individuals use various forms of language according to the context, it can be the formality of speech, or sociolinguistic factors, such as age, gender, and social class (Wanjiku, 2018). Communication with different people varies in terms of situation, social identity, and purpose. Therefore, language variation is inevitable as different situations require adjustments to language to fit the context (Susilawati, 2020). Although many studies have been conducted on the variation of vocabulary use among second language (L2) learners in

* Corresponding Author

different contexts, few, if any, have looked at the different use of vocabulary, and provided a gender-based comparison among EFL learners, especially in Saudi Arabia.

This study aims to understand how Saudi male and female EFL learners use vocabulary differently. In addition, the study examines how Saudi EFL learners use English vocabulary in both perceptive and productive forms. This inquiry not only contributes to knowledge of language acquisition, but also has potential implications for refining English language learning and vocabulary use strategies, particularly in the context of Saudi Arabia.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender-based language variation, which involves vocabulary, grammatical structure, and speech patterns, refers to how language is employed differently by individuals on the basis of their gender. Gender has been considered a predictor of differences in language use that is more prevalent than other social factors. Indeed, gender differences are considered as a critical factor in the “systematic variation of key vocabulary between males and females” (Johnston & Schembri, 2007, p. 33).

Lexical variation, or the use of different lexis to talk about the same topic, occurs among different speakers of the same language variety. Studies have shown that gender differences have a profound effect on lexical variation, consistent with other cognitive-behavioural traits related to gender (Piersoul & Van de Velde, 2022). The study of gender-based language variation and its significance in providing a better understanding of sociolinguistic phenomena related to the linguistic differences between men and women and the socialization of male and female roles (Li, 2022). Lexical variation plays a role in forming the identity of each gender as the linguistic properties of the language impose particular expressions on them (Alhaboubi, 2021). However, gender-based variation is not only used to express gender identity. Gender differences are also an indicator of developmental delays. Language tests to diagnose delays in cognitive development show a greater prevalence among males than females (Wallentin, 2020). Hence, gender is considered a determinant in different fields of language studies.

The gender gap in language learning is still a matter of debate and needs further exploration. However, a study conducted by Wucherer and Reiterer (2018) found differences between males and females in language learning and acquisition, with males outperforming females in phonetic speech while females led in grammar learning. Such differences should be accommodated and treated with an open mind to decrease the gender gap in language learning.

A. Gender-Based Language Variation Among EFL Learners

Gender is a prevalent factor addressed in language studies. Males and females have distinct features that are apparent in their physical structure, behaviour, cognition, language, and many other areas (Prabha & Raja, 2021). Gender has thus received considerable attention from linguists, sociolinguists and researchers who have explored differences in language acquisition related to vocabulary, communication, and syntax (Bhatti & Mukhtar, 2020). According to Prabha and Raja (2021), children who live in the same environment show gender differences that affect their linguistic abilities. Biologically, females are more abstract, while males are more sensory. However, males are more innovative in language use, whereas females are more traditional and thus, use frequent language patterns. Apart from biological differences, women and men use different ways to communicate with the same gender (Montero-SaizAja, 2021). Differences in style and communication, as well as in learning strategies, can clearly be seen in EFL learning contexts (Maulina, 2018). Gender differences also manifest themselves in lexical use.

Vocabulary is a crucial element in language learning (Montero-SaizAja, 2021) and is essential for mastering the different skills in EFL (Alshumrani & Al-Ahmadi, 2022). However, the relationship between gender and vocabulary acquisition has received little attention in research. Such undertaken research has measured gender differences in vocabulary acquisition and use in terms of level and size and has considered both receptive and productive vocabulary (Montero-SaizAja, 2021). Studies have shown contradictory findings in terms of the impact of gender differences on vocabulary learning (Alharbi, 2021). Kobayashi and Little (2020) highlighted the results of two studies conducted with Chinese university students by Gu and Johnson (1997), which traced differences in the vocabulary learning strategies employed by males and females. Gu and Johnson (1997) found higher levels of language proficiency among female students due to their motivation and personal preferences, while females reported believing in the natural acquisition of vocabulary and tended to use more metacognitive strategies and learning strategies than males. Males, on the other hand, believed in rote memorization as a way of acquiring vocabulary and spent less time learning language outside the classroom. In contrast to these studies, Ng (2018) found a preference for the use of cognitive strategies in vocabulary learning among male students, while Kobayashi and Little (2020) identified the students’ social background as being of greater relevance in relation to EFL vocabulary acquisition strategies. However, Bhatti and Mukhtar (2020) found greater use of vocabulary acquisition strategies among females than males, supporting the earlier studies of Gu (2002) and Wen and Johnson (1997).

In the Saudi context, gender segregation has led to language differences, lexical variation, and the emergence of distinctive linguistic features between genders. Al Ghamedi et al. (2023) refer to two studies showing gender differences in EFL learning among Saudi students: Aldosari (2014) reported that women were more motivated to learn English and put more effort into language learning than males, whereas Daif-Allah and Aljumah (2020) found that both genders were equally motivated to learn English. Another significant study on gender differences leading to lexical variation in Saudi

Arabia was undertaken by Omar (2018). The findings indicated that females use more English loanwords in their speech because using English appears more prestigious to them. In addition, the study showed that the use of English words by females was related to their modern identity, forging a break in male dominance in society. Therefore, lexical variation is closely related to gender identity in the Saudi context.

B. Studies of Vocabulary Acquisition Among Saudi EFL Learners

There is little empirical evidence in the current literature on vocabulary acquisition in Saudi Arabia of learners' achievement, although a few studies have been conducted that provide some insights. Alhaysony (2017) found poor knowledge of vocabulary learning strategies and no influence of gender on the use of direct and indirect strategies among Saudi learners. Khan et al. (2018) reported that a lack of EFL vocabulary among Saudi students leads to speech anxiety and communication difficulties. They also indicated that female learners lack vocabulary knowledge, which limits their oral fluency and leads to poor performance. Research in the Saudi context has also shown poor performance in EFL listening and reading due to a lack of necessary vocabulary, which hinders learners from reaching higher levels of proficiency (Al Shammari, 2020). Ankawi (2022) studied the acquisition of academic vocabulary among Saudi postgraduate students in New Zealand universities. The students complained of having poor learning strategies, struggling in retaining and recalling vocabulary words they had learned, although, perhaps surprisingly, they could easily learn technical words related to their majors. Gender has been identified as a critical factor in vocabulary acquisition in the Saudi context, but research shows conflicting results. Alqarni (2018) used Nation's standardized vocabulary test with 71 male and female university students from Saudi Arabia and found that males outperformed females on all five sections of the test. Aldeajj (2020) similarly showed that male teachers in Saudi public schools outperformed female teachers in vocabulary knowledge tests.

Al Shammari (2020) investigated differences in learning strategies among female and male Saudi learners and, consistent with the study conducted by Alhaysony (2017), found that gender did not affect vocabulary learning or EFL learning more broadly. At the 2000-word frequency level, students used both cognitive and metacognitive strategies, while at the 500-word level, students tended to employ metacognitive strategies. In Suliman's (2021) study of the vocabulary learning strategies used by Saudi learners in the United States (US), gender proved to be a strong indicator of the use of certain strategies over others. The study found that strategies requiring communication with others, such as social strategies, may be avoided by female Saudi EFL learners due to cultural and religious boundaries on communication between genders, but gender did not affect attitudes or motivation for learning EFL. This might indicate greater caution in articulation on the part of females in contrast to males and clearly supports the argument that females are more thoughtful and aware of their speech than males. Alsharif (2022) presented similar findings in a study of 116 female participants studying English language and linguistics at undergraduate level. The study sought to establish a connection between vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary size. The participants used metacognitive strategies most frequently and cognitive strategies least. The results also showed that the female students were independent learners and sought vocabulary knowledge in non-conventional ways. In another study, Alshammari (2020) found that the higher the size of vocabulary, the more metacognitive strategies were employed.

What can be argued, based on the existing evidence, is that vocabulary acquisition among Saudi learners can be enhanced by applying a wide variety of learning strategies, regardless of gender as a factor in variation and language differences, contrasting with studies undertaken in other countries where gender was identified as a critical variable in L2 learning.

C. Studies of Perceptive and Productive Vocabulary Use

In the process of language learning, the development of language proficiency is highly dependent on vocabulary acquisition. Vocabulary use has been divided into two types: perceptive, which is defined as knowledge of the meaning of words before they are used, and productive, which is the use of vocabulary in different contexts (Allal-Sumoto et al., 2023). Receptive knowledge is necessary to understand the meaning of words when reading or listening, while productive knowledge relates to the use of words in speaking or writing (Lei & Reynolds, 2022). In other words, receptive knowledge indicates understanding of form, meaning and possible contexts, while productive knowledge implies mastery of the word's spelling, pronunciation, and syntactic use, as well as pragmatic features (San Mateo-Valdehita & de Diego, 2021).

Alqarni (2018) conducted a study of 71 male and female Saudi university students and measured their performance on Nation's (2008) standardized vocabulary tests over the 2nd 1000-, 3rd 1000-, 5th 1000- and 10th 1000-word frequency levels. The results showed different knowledge of vocabulary at different levels, but the students' performance deteriorated significantly towards the higher word levels. Mohammed and Alwadai (2019) found that most students in secondary schools in Saudi Arabia fall within the 1000- and 2000-word frequency levels. Hence, they tend to perform poorly in standardized vocabulary tests, struggle to comprehend texts, and present low performance in the four skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. They also found that receptive vocabulary retention was low among students.

Afzal (2019) investigated vocabulary learning problems among BA English majors in Saudi Arabia. The learners reported facing difficulties with receptive knowledge, specifically being unable to identify or match sounds to words properly. Grammatical barriers, such as not knowing the part of speech, also hindered productive vocabulary use. Moreover, the participants expressed difficulty in moving the word from the memory to the meaning level, so they were unable to use learned words productively. The problems they faced were pronouncing and spelling new words, which

imply difficulties at the receptive level. They also had difficulties using new words correctly, identifying the grammatical structure of words and guessing meaning from context, demonstrating that they were not transferring receptive knowledge to the productive level. This is representative of a limited word repository, consistent with Mohammed and Alwadai's (2019) findings. Alharbi (2021) found a slight difference in both receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge in favour of females.

Although the correlation between gender and productive vocabulary has not been sufficiently covered in research, the literature published on productive vocabulary implies that gender is a factor in divergence (Montero-SaizAja, 2021). Females were found to outperform males in vocabulary learning strategies and productive vocabulary. However, Montero-SaizAja (2021) who conducted a study of second-year secondary Spanish learners of ESL, found that gender played no role in inducing differences in the use of productive vocabulary; rather, these were due to differences in learning strategies and other social factors.

D. Theoretical Background

Since this research aimed to investigate gender-based differences in the perception and productive use of English vocabulary among Saudi EFL learners, focusing on both male and female learners, the study was based on the theory of metalinguistic awareness, which provides a valuable lens for examining how bilingualism may influence the depth and sophistication of language use in male and female learners. According to Altman et al. (2018), "Metalinguistic awareness is defined as the ability to distance oneself from the content of speech in order to reflect upon and manipulate the structure of language" (p. 3). In addition, metalinguistic awareness comprises the set of multiple language skills that are related to the different forms of L2, such as lexical, phonological, syntactic, and morphological awareness (Bialystok et al., 2014). Thus, by analysing and understanding L2 lexical choices, it is possible to explore how each gender group understands and employs differences in meaning and the appropriateness of word use in various social and communicative contexts. The investigation of such differences offers insights into how metalinguistic awareness, potentially differing between genders due to cognitive, educational, or sociocultural factors, shapes vocabulary selection and usage. This aspect of the study aimed to identify major gender-based differences in how male and female Saudi EFL learners apply their understanding of linguistic perceptions, thereby contributing to the broader understanding of language acquisition and usage in a bilingual context.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Objectives and Questions

This research seeks to investigate gender-based differences in the perception and the production of English vocabulary among Saudi EFL learners, exploring how male and female learners in Saudi Arabia perceive and employ English vocabulary both receptively and productively. By examining patterns in vocabulary choices, this research seeks to identify distinctive tendencies and variations in the way that Saudi EFL learners express themselves linguistically. This focus on vocabulary use will provide a comprehensive understanding of how gender influences lexical preferences and usage among this specific learner population. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Saudi EFL male and female learners differ in their perceptions of English vocabulary?
2. In what ways do Saudi male and female EFL learners exhibit variations in the productive use of English vocabulary?
3. What are the prevalent patterns in vocabulary choice among Saudi EFL learners in both receptive (perceptive) and productive contexts?

To gather data on gender-based perceptions of English vocabulary, an online questionnaire comprising both qualitative and quantitative questions, specifically designed for Saudi advanced English speakers. We used a focused sampling technique, primarily engaging male and female faculty members across various Saudi universities, along with advanced speakers proficient in English. This approach aimed to ensure that the sample accurately represented the study population, effectively addressing gender differences. Consequently, the number of male and female respondents was nearly identical, enhancing the credibility and validity of the collected data. By reaching out to participants from diverse regions in Saudi Arabia, the study acknowledged potential variations in perceptions across different areas. The targeting of advanced speakers served to ensure that the detailed questions asked in the interviews, conducted in English, would be easily comprehensible to the targeted respondents. The study involved a total of 80 participants, 48% male and 52% female. This balanced gender distribution contributes to a more robust and representative dataset for the analysis of gender-based perceptions.

B. Instrument and Design of the Study

Data were collected through a questionnaire designed and distributed using Google Forms. Questionnaires is commonly used in sociolinguistics research (Dörnyei, 2007) for measuring attitudinal, factual, behavioural, and statistical data. To gather the required data, the questionnaire items were designed to identify gender-based lexical perceptions in Saudi EFL vocabulary use among both male and female participants in receptive and productive contexts. The respondents were also asked to state their gender to serve the research purpose. The questionnaire contained both close-ended items, with responses given on a Likert-type scale, and open-ended items to gain a better understanding of the participants' perceptions by exploring their views and comments.

C. Data Collection Procedures

Prior to administration, the questionnaire was first scrutinized by four experts in the field to review its quality. It was then distributed to advanced English speakers within Saudi universities and other educational institutions. Ethical guidelines were followed carefully to ensure the confidentiality of the participants' data and to maintain their anonymity. The data collected were used only for research purposes and accessible only to the authors of the study.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaire was completed by 80 Saudi participants, with an equal distribution of gender (40 males and 40 females). The female participants primarily fell into three major age groups: 18–26 (9), 26–35 (15), and over 36 (16). In contrast, the male participants were largely categorized in two age groups: 26–35 (11) and over 36 (26). Hence, over half of the participants in this study were aged 36 or over.

The results displayed in the Tables 1–4 represent the four main sections of the study (vocabulary perception and production, and familiarity with and attitudes towards lexical variation). In the first section, the participants answered vocabulary perception items. Overall, the respondents' answers showed that they did not find lexical variation a barrier to vocabulary perception. All the female participants and 92% of the male speakers reported they could recognize different vocabulary variations used by English speakers. Similarly, over 90% of the sample reported that they could notice different lexical choices in various contexts. Table 1 shows the responses to each statement pertinent to lexical perception.

TABLE 1
VOCABULARY PERCEPTION (ITEMS 1–8)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I can recognize different vocabulary variations used by others in spoken English					
Females	18 (45%)	22 (55%)	0	0	0
Males	19 (47.5%)	18 (45%)	0	0	3 (7.5%)
I am aware of the subtle vocabulary differences between English speakers					
Females	13 (32.5%)	26 (65%)	0	1 (2.5%)	0
Males	14 (35%)	22 (55%)	0	1 (2.5%)	3 (7.5%)
I find it challenging to understand the intended meaning when others use unfamiliar vocabulary					
Females	5 (12.5%)	15 (37.5%)	1 (2.5%)	16 (40%)	3 (7.5%)
Males	6 (15%)	15 (37.5%)	0	13 (32.5%)	6 (15%)
I pay attention to the choice of words used by English speakers around me					
Females	24 (60%)	14 (35%)	0	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)
Males	20 (50%)	19 (47.5%)	0	1 (2.5%)	0
I can identify variations in vocabulary based on regional accents or dialects					
Females	13 (32.5%)	20 (50%)	1 (2.5%)	5 (12.5%)	1 (2.5%)
Males	14 (35%)	20 (50%)	0	5 (12.5%)	1 (2.5%)
I notice differences in the vocabulary used by people in various contexts					
Females	14 (35%)	24 (60%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	0
Males	11 (27.5%)	26 (65%)	0	3 (7.5%)	0
Recognizing vocabulary variations is important for effective communication in English					
Females	24 (60%)	13 (32.5%)	0	2 (5%)	1 (2.5%)
Males	24 (60%)	16 (40%)	0	0	0
I feel confident in my ability to perceive and understand diverse vocabulary choices in English					
Females	18 (45%)	20 (50%)	0	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)
Males	20 (50%)	17 (42.5%)	0	3 (7.5%)	0

Vocabulary production showed a similar trend, with both the female and male participants showing awareness of lexical variation in English. Table 2 lists the results for the second section of the questionnaire.

TABLE 2
VOCABULARY PRODUCTION

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I choose my words to convey a specific meaning in English					
Females	21 (52.5%)	17 (42.5%)	0	2 (5%)	0
Males	25 (62.5%)	15 (37.5%)	0	0	0
I adapt my vocabulary use based on the context of communication					
Females	20 (50%)	19 (47.5%)	0	1 (2.5%)	0
Males	22 (55%)	18 (45%)	0	0	0
I incorporate new and varied vocabulary into my English speech					
Females	13 (32.5%)	25 (62.5%)	0	2 (5%)	0
Males	16 (40%)	23 (57.5%)	0	1 (2.5%)	0
I consider the impact of the situation or context on my choice of words when speaking English					
Females	19 (47.5%)	21 (52.5%)	0	0	0
Males	23 (57.5%)	17 (42.5%)	0	0	0
I enjoy experimenting with different words and expressions in my English conversations					
Females	16 (40%)	24 (60%)	0	0	0
Males	19 (47.5%)	17 (42.5%)	0	4 (10%)	0
I believe using diverse vocabulary enhances the richness of my English expression					
Females	26 (65%)	13 (32.5%)	0	1 (2.5%)	0
Males	31 (77.5%)	9 (22.5%)	0	0	0
I feel comfortable using region-specific vocabulary when communicating in English					
Females	11 (27.5%)	23 (57.5%)	0	6 (15%)	0
Males	12 (30%)	13 (32.5%)	0	14 (35%)	1 (2.5%)
I believe adjusting vocabulary based on the audience is essential for effective communication					
Females	26 (65%)	12 (30%)	0	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)
Males	25 (62.5%)	13 (32.5%)	0	2 (5%)	0
I am confident in my ability to use lexical variation to express nuances in English					
Females	12 (30%)	23 (57.5%)	1 (2.5%)	4 (10%)	0
Males	17 (42.5%)	18 (45%)	0	5 (12.5%)	0

Overall, both male and female participants were positive about incorporating lexical variation in EFL learning. Their responses to the items in Table 3 reflect their understanding of the importance of learning more about lexical variation in English and show how motivated they were to explore lexical differences in English varieties.

TABLE 3
ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEXICAL VARIATION

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Learning about lexical variation in English is important for my language development					
Females	22 (55%)	18 (45%)	0	0	0
Males	22 (55%)	14 (35%)	0	3 (7.5%)	1 (2.5%)
I believe incorporating diverse vocabulary enhances my communication skills					
Females	19 (47.5%)	21 (52.5%)	0	0	0
Males	20 (50%)	19 (47.5%)	0	1 (2.5%)	0
I feel motivated to improve my understanding and use of lexical variations in English					
Females	27 (67.5%)	12 (30%)	0	1 (2.5%)	0
Males	21 (52.5%)	17 (42.5%)	0	2 (5%)	0
I believe paying attention to contextual vocabulary differences is crucial for cross-cultural communication					
Females	20 (50%)	19 (47.5%)	0	1 (2.5%)	0
Males	18 (45%)	20 (50%)	0	2 (5%)	0
I think considering contextual vocabulary differences is valuable for effective communication					
Females	13 (32.5%)	25 (62.5%)	0	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)
Males	15 (37.5%)	25 (62.5%)	0	0	0
Overall, I am satisfied with my current level of awareness and use of lexical variation in English					
Females	9 (22.5%)	25 (62.5%)	1 (2.5%)	5 (12.5%)	0
Males	11 (27.5%)	21 (52.5%)	0	7 (17.5%)	1 (2.5%)
I enjoy exploring and incorporating new words into my English vocabulary					
Females	20 (50%)	18 (45%)	0	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)
Males	22 (55%)	16 (40%)	0	2 (5%)	0
I believe understanding lexical variation contributes to my overall proficiency in English					
Females	22 (55%)	18 (45%)	0	0	0
Males	23 (57.5%)	17 (42.5%)	0	0	0
I am open to learning and adopting new vocabulary choices in my English communication					
Females	28 (70%)	11 (27.5%)	0	1 (2.5%)	0
Males	28 (70%)	12 (30%)	0	0	0
I believe enhancing my knowledge of lexical variation will positively impact my English language skills					
Females	28 (70%)	11 (27.5%)	0	1 (2.5%)	0
Males	25 (62.5%)	15 (37.5%)	0	0	0

Table 4 illustrates that the participants showed familiarity with lexical variation to the extent of being able to select the appropriate lexical items according to the degree of formality, use synonyms in writing, alternating between English synonyms in their speech, and recognising different regional lexical variation.

TABLE 4
FAMILIARITY WITH LEXICAL VARIATION

	Not familiar	Somewhat familiar	Neutral	Familiar	Very familiar
Incorporating idiomatic expressions into your spoken English					
Females	0	11 (27.5%)	2 (5%)	22 (55%)	5 (12.5%)
Males	0	15 (37.5%)	0	16 (40%)	9 (22.5%)
Adapting formal and informal language based on the communication context					
Females	1 (2.5%)	5 (12.5%)	0	17 (42.5%)	17 (42.5%)
Males	1 (2.5%)	3 (7.5%)	0	20 (50%)	16 (40%)
Using synonyms or alternative words to convey the same meaning in writing					
Females	0	2 (5%)	0	18 (45%)	20 (50%)
Males	0	2 (5%)	0	17 (42.5%)	21 (52.5%)
Experimenting with new words or expressions when speaking English					
Females	0	4 (10%)	0	28 (70%)	8 (20%)
Males	1 (2.5%)	3 (7.5%)	0	25 (62.5%)	11 (27.5%)
I seek opportunities to incorporate industry-specific vocabulary into professional communication					
Females	5 (12.5%)	8 (20%)	0	19 (47.5%)	8 (20%)
Males	1 (2.5%)	7 (17.5%)	0	20 (50%)	12 (30%)
Adjusting your vocabulary to suit the preferences of your audience when writing formal documents					
Females	1 (2.5%)	5 (12.5%)	0	13 (32.5%)	21 (52.5%)
Males	0	4 (10%)	0	19 (47.5%)	17 (42.5%)
Recognizing and understanding regional accents or dialect-specific words					
Females	2 (5%)	7 (17.5%)	1 (2.5%)	19 (47.5%)	12 (30%)
Males	2 (5%)	9 (22.5%)	0	21 (52.5%)	8 (20%)
Comprehending context-specific vocabulary in literature or academic texts					
Females	1 (2.5%)	2 (5%)	0	27 (67.5%)	10 (25%)
Males	0	8 (20%)	0	21 (52.5%)	11 (27.5%)
Understanding the subtle differences in meaning between closely related words					
Females	0	7 (17.5%)	1 (2.5%)	19 (47.5%)	13 (32.5%)
Males	1 (2.5%)	10 (25%)	0	19 (47.5%)	10 (25%)
Identifying figurative language and metaphors used by others in spoken or written English					
Females	2 (5%)	2 (5%)	0	21 (52.5%)	14 (35%)
Males	2 (5%)	6 (15%)	0	19 (47.5%)	13 (32.5%)
Easily identifying shifts in vocabulary when listening to English speakers of different age groups					
Females	1 (2.5%)	7 (17.5%)	1 (2.5%)	19 (47.5%)	12 (30%)
Males	1 (2.5%)	5 (12.5%)	0	26 (65%)	8 (20%)

The questionnaire also prompted the participants to answer an optional open-ended question about their perceptions of gender differences in the awareness of lexical variation. A female participant suggested that male and female EFL students have different levels of access to learning resources, which in turn affects their abilities to perceive and use English lexical items. Other female participants attributed lexical differences to different thought processes and levels of motivation across the genders. Other participants, however, argued that there are no differences between males and females in terms of the perception and production of English lexical items. Some male participants argued that cultural norms and levels of education could contribute to lexical differences across genders. Although males and females may belong to and live in the same environment, some male participants still took the view that there is a cultural divide that shapes EFL speakers' interests and goals in learning and affects the amount of exposure to English and their choices between the variety of learning resources available online. One male participant, however, suggested that one's gender is not the most important factor here. Rather, their interests play a major role in terms of their willingness to learn about lexical variation in English.

It can be argued that there are no major differences between males and females regarding vocabulary perception and lexical variations. This contrasts with Alharbi's (2021) study, which found that females performed slightly better in receptive vocabulary knowledge than males. This discrepancy could be related to the age and background of the participants. In this study, most participants were mature and well-educated, while participants in Alharbi's (2021) study were young students. Both genders are aware of lexical variations and pay attention to differences in vocabulary usage by English speakers. They acknowledged their ability to recognize accents and dialects. The participants expressed the belief that it is important to recognize vocabulary variations and act accordingly.

Furthermore, both genders were similar in expressing awareness of vocabulary production. They choose their words intentionally and purposefully. Both agreed that adjusting the expressions they employ is necessary according to the needs of the context. This is in line with some studies that have found both genders are likely to act similarly in vocabulary production (Canga Alonso & Arribas García, 2014; Fleckenstein, 2018; Moreno Espinosa, 2010; Montero-SaizAja, 2021).

However, some studies have found females to be slightly better in vocabulary production than males due to their interest in accuracy and precision (Montero-SaizAja, 2021), while others have shown that males have a slight advantage over females in vocabulary production (Fergusson & Horwood, 2005). Thus, it seems that there is no definitive answer as there are many variables that may affect the perception of the participants. A possible justification for this could be related to gender-gap diversification (Tomassini, 2021).

The participants in this study were mostly in favour of lexical variation. Both genders showed their willingness to incorporate lexical variation in their communications. They justified this as it enriches and expands their vocabulary repertoire. This is in line with previous studies that have indicated that lexical variation is seen as fostering and supporting language competency (Alshumrani & Al-Ahmadi, 2022). Indeed, the ability to use and include a range of lexis in conversations and communications reflects one's deep knowledge and rich repertoire. Moreover, studying gender-based language variation provides a holistic overview of social linguistic phenomena related to the linguistic differences between males and females and their socialization of roles (Li, 2022). Lexical variation plays a pivotal role in forming the identity of each gender, dictated by the linguistic properties of the language itself, which imposes particular expressions according to gender (Alhaboubi, 2021).

With regard to familiarity with lexical variation, both genders reported using idiomatic and informal expressions in their conversations. They were also in favour of including new words or technical terms in their conversations with others. Figurative language and metaphors were also reported by participants as easily recognizable and incorporated. This familiarity and willingness by the participants to incorporate lexical variations are worth highlighting if any difficulties or linguistic barriers are involved, as previous studies have suggested (Mohammed & Alwadai, 2019). However, a point of interest is whether the participants' familiarity with metaphors includes an ability to produce conventional and creative metaphors. This is important as it may indicate fluid intelligence and verbal fluency (Benedek et al., 2014). Thus, it is worth exploring in future research if the verbal fluency is linked to the theoretical functions of understanding of metaphor.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study provides significant insights into gender-based differences in the perception and productive use of English vocabulary among Saudi EFL learners. The findings reveal that, in contrary to some previous studies, gender did not play a significant role in the perception and use of vocabulary among the mature and well-educated participants in this research. Both male and female learners demonstrated a keen awareness of lexical variations and perception and showed adaptability in recognizing and employing different accents and dialects. This finding suggests that factors such as age and English language level might be more influential in shaping vocabulary perception and usage than gender.

In terms of vocabulary production, the study aligns with other research indicating negligible differences between the genders in this area. This finding challenges some existing narratives and points towards more understanding of gender roles in language acquisition, especially among advanced, educated learners. The study highlights the complexity of language acquisition and suggests that gender may not be as decisive a factor as previously thought.

Moreover, the participants' positive attitudes towards lexical variation were notable, reflecting an appreciation for the richness and diversity of language. Both genders recognized the importance of incorporating varied vocabulary into their communication, viewing this as a means of enhancing their language competency. This attitude aligns with the sociolinguistic perspective of language variation as a tool for identity formation and underscores the importance of exposure to diverse linguistic forms in language learning.

Fundamentally, this research contributes to the broader dialogue on second language acquisition, especially in the context of sociolinguistics. It underscores the need to consider a range of factors, including age, education, and cultural background, when examining gender differences in language use and learning. Future studies might explore the cognitive aspects of language acquisition in greater depth, such as the relationship between metaphor comprehension and verbal fluency, to enhance understanding of the complexities of second language learning. This research contributes to academic knowledge in the field and offers practical implications for educators and linguists emphasizing the importance of contextually informed approaches to understanding vocabulary use and acquisition.

REFERENCES

- [1] Afzal, N. (2019). A study on vocabulary-learning problems encountered by BA English majors at the university level of education. *Arab World English Journal*, 10(3), 81–98. <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol10no3.6>
- [2] Aldeaij, G. A. (2020). *Proficiency and vocabulary levels of Saudi EFL teachers: Using a vocabulary levels test* [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of King Saud.
- [3] Alharbi, J. M. (2021). Vocabulary knowledge Among English Majors in a Saudi Arabia University. *Technium Soc. Sci. J.*, 24, 769- 784.
- [4] Alhaysony, M. (2017). Language learning strategies use by Saudi EFL students: The effect of duration of English language study and gender. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 7(1), 18–28. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0701.03>
- [5] Allal-Sumoto, T. K., Miyoshi, K., & Mizuhara, H. (2023). The effect of productive vocabulary knowledge on second language comprehension. *Frontier Psychology*, 14(1), 1–9. <https://10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1049885>

- [6] Alqarni, I. (2018). Receptive vocabulary size of male and female Saudi English major graduates. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 9(1), 111–119. <https://10.5539/ijel.v9n1p111>
- [7] AlShammari, S. (2020). EFL vocabulary learning strategies used by Saudi Arabia university students. *Advanced Education*, 16, 28–38. <https://10.20535/2410-8286.202436>
- [8] Alsharif, R. (2022). Relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary size: Evidence from Saudi female EFL learners. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 10(1), 188–197. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.10n.1p.188>
- [9] Alshumrani, H. A., & Al-Ahmadi, N. M. (2022). The representation of vocabulary knowledge aspects in Saudi EFL textbooks. *Arab World English Journal*, 13(4), 325–340. <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol13no4.21>
- [10] Altman, C., Goldstein, T., & Armon-Lotem, S. (2018). Vocabulary, metalinguistic awareness and language dominance among bilingual preschool children. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 1953. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01953>.
- [11] Ankawi, A. (2022). Academic Vocabulary Acquisition Difficulties for Saudi Postgraduate Students in New Zealand Universities. *English Language Teaching*, Vol. 15, No. 9, pp.138-150. <https://10.5539/elt.v15n9p138>
- [12] Bialystok, E., Peets, K. F., & Moreno, S. (2014). Producing bilinguals through immersion education: Development of metalinguistic awareness. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 35,177–191.
- [13] Belahcen, A., & Ouahmiche, G. (2017). An investigation of language variation and change among three age-groups: A case study. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 5(3–1), 24–35. <https://10.11648/j.ijll.s.2017050301.14>
- [14] Benedek, M., Beaty, R., Jauk, E., Koschutnig, K., Fink, A., Silvia, P. J., ... & Neubauer, A. C. (2014). Creating metaphors: The neural basis of figurative language production. *NeuroImage*, 90, 99–106.
- [15] Bhatti, M., & Mukhtar, R. (2020). Impact of vocabulary learning strategies on gender-based ESL learners in Pakistan. *Journal of Research and Innovation in Language*, 2(3), 134–140. <https://doi.org/10.31849/reila.v2i3.4603>.
- [16] Canga Alonso, A., & Arribas García, M. (2014). Productive vocabulary knowledge of Spanish EFL learners. *Revista Electrónica de Lingüística Aplicada*, 1, 39–56.
- [17] Daif-Allah, A. S., & Aljumah, F. H. (2020). Differences in Motivation to Learning English among Saudi University Students. *English Language Teaching*, 13(2), 63-74.
- [18] Dornyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford university press.
- [19] Fleckenstein, L. M. (2018). *English vocabulary knowledge at the end of compulsory education in Iceland* [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of Iceland.
- [20] Hasanah, L., Pradina, S., Hadita, A., & Putri, W. C. (2019). Sociolinguistic influence in the use of English as a second language (ESL) classroom: Seeing from Onovughe's (2012) perspective. *Elsya: Journal of English Language Studies*, 1(1), 28–32. <https://doi.org/10.31849/elsya.v1i1.2538>
- [21] Johnston, & Schembri. (2007). *Australian Sign Language: An Introduction to Sign Language Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [22] Khan, R., Radzuan, R., Shahbaz, M., Ibrahim, A., Khan, M. (2018). The role of vocabulary knowledge in speaking development of Saudi EFL learners. *Arab World English Journal*, 9(1), 406–418. <https://110.31235/osf.io/68gwj>.
- [23] Kobayashi, K., & Little A. (2022). Gender differences in the effects of explicit vocabulary learning strategies training. *Journal of Second Language Teaching and Research*, 8(1), 23–51.
- [24] Lei, Y., & Reynolds, B. L. (2022). Learning English vocabulary from word cards: A research synthesis. *Frontier Psychology*, 13. <https://10.3389/fpsyg.2022.984211>
- [25] Li, X. (2022). Gender differences and discrimination in lexicon. *Advances in social science. Education and Humanities Research*, 673. <https://10.2991/assehr.k.220706.117>
- [26] Maulina, M. (2018). Gender differences in language development, acquisition, comprehension, and production. *Proceeding of the 65th TEFLIN International Conference, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia*, 65(1). <https://doi.org/10.35542/osf.io/tdxzu>
- [27] Mohammed, A., & Alwadai, M. (2019). Evaluating Saudi EFL secondary schools students' performance on Paul Nation's Standardized Vocabulary Level Tests. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 9(5), 487–493. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0905.01>
- [28] Moreno Espinosa, S. (2010). Boys' and girls' L2 word associations. In R. M. Jiménez Catalán (Ed.), *Gender perspectives on vocabulary in foreign and second languages* (pp. 139–163). Palgrave Macmillan.
- [29] Montero-SaizAja, A. (2021). Gender-based differences in EFL learners' language learning strategies and productive vocabulary. *Theory and Practice of Second Language Acquisition*, 7, 83–107.
- [30] Omar, A. (2018). Exploring gender usage and adaptations of English loanwords in Saudi colloquial Arabic. *Hermes*, 7(3), 171–215. <https://10.21608/HERMS.2018.71679>
- [31] Oviogun, P. V., & Veerdee, P. S. (2020). Definition of language and linguistics: Basic competence. *Macrolinguistics and Microlinguistics*, 1(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.21744/mami.v1n1.1>
- [32] Piersoul, J., & Van de Velde, F. (2023). Men use more complex language than women, but the difference has decreased over time: A study on 120 years of written Dutch. *Linguistics*, 61(3), 725–747. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ling-2021-0022>
- [33] Prahba, C., & Raja, W. (2021). Gender differences in English language acquisition. *Annals of the Romanian Society of Cell Biology*, 25(5), 3914–3917. DOI. 10.47255/f8aa1v48.
- [34] San Mateo-Valdehita, A., & Criado de Diego, C. (2021). Receptive and productive vocabulary acquisition: Effectiveness of three types of tasks. Results from French students of Spanish as second language. *Onomázein*, (51), 37–56. <https://doi.org/10.7764/onomazein.51.05>
- [35] Suliman, A. A. K. (2021). *Vocabulary learning strategies used by ESL Saudi students in the United States* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Andrews University. <https://dx.doi.org/10.32597/dissertations/1761/>
- [36] Susilawati, E. (2020). The inclusion of sociolinguistic context in the text materials of English text books for junior high school. *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, 4(2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.21093/ijeltal.v4i2.485>
- [37] Tomassini, C. (2021). Gender gaps in science: Systematic review of the main explanations and research agenda. *Education in the Knowledge Society (EKS)*, (22), 13- 25. DOI: 10.14201/eks.25437.

- [38] Wang, J., Jin, G., & Li, W. (2023). Changing perceptions of language in sociolinguistics. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10(91). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01574>
- [39] Wanjiku, N. F. (2018). *Lexical variation and change in the Northern Dialect of Gikāyū Language* [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of Nairobi.
- [40] Wallentin, M. (2020). Gender differences in language are small but matter for disorders. In M. J. Aminoff, F. Boller, & D. E. Swaab (Eds.), *Handbook of clinical neurology* (Vol. 175, pp. 81–102). Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-444-64123-6.00007-2>
- [41] Wucherer, B. V., & Reiterer, S. M. (2018). Language is a girlie thing, isn't it? A psycholinguistic exploration of the L2 gender gap. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 21(1), 118–134.

Nesreen Saud Alahmadi is an Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at the department of Languages and Translation, Faculty of Art and Humanities, Taibah University. She has published a number of articles in both local and international journals including books' reviews, contributing to the field of applied linguistics. Her research interests are second language acquisition, second language learning and teaching, second language interaction, and Applied Linguistics. Member in the British Association for Applied linguistics.

Mohammad Almoaily is Professor of Applied Linguistics at the Department of English Language at the College of Language Sciences, King Saud University. His Research Interests are language variation and change, code-switching, language policy, politeness, and pidginisation and creolization.

Fahad Almulhim is an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at the Department of English at the College of Arts, King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia. He is interested in Sociolinguistics, with a focus on codeswitching studies, language policy, language and gender, in addition to communication strategies used by EFL learners.

Ali Alsaawi is an Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at Majmaah University, Saudi Arabia. He holds a PhD in applied linguistics from Newcastle University, UK. He has published number of papers in the areas of discourse analysis, sociolinguistics and second language acquisition. He has participated in number of local and international conferences.

Hamza Alshenqeeti is a Professor of Applied Linguistics at Taibah University in Saudi Arabia. He holds a Master's in Applied Linguistics from the University of Essex and a PhD in Applied Linguistics from Newcastle University, United Kingdom. His research interests span computer-assisted language learning (CALL), classroom discourse, educational linguistics, language teacher training, conversation analysis, and sociolinguistics. Hamza has publications in both local and international journals and edited books, contributing to the field of applied linguistics.