

Gender-Fair Language Awareness of Out-of-School Learners in the Alternative Learning System

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to probe into the gender-fair language (GFL) awareness of out-of-school learners in the Senior High School level. The respondents were chosen from Grade 11 and Grade 12 learners in the Schools Division of La Carlota City. 145 learners responded to a 30-item researcher-made questionnaire with 10 items of self-assessment statements and 20 items of formative assessment questions to measure levels of perceived and actual GFL awareness respectively. Specifically, the questionnaire targeted the following GFL competencies: (1) Using Gender-Neutral Terms, (2) Eliminating Unnecessary Gendered Pronouns, (3) Avoiding Discriminatory Language, (4) Respecting Preferred Pronouns and Honorifics, and (5) Discerning LGBTQIA++ Terminology. Results revealed that perceived GFL awareness differ when classified in terms of

sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation, but not in terms of age. Overall, the self-assessment items garnered a high extent of awareness from the participants. On the other hand, actual GFL awareness differed in all classifications of the respondent's demographic profile. The scores from the formal assessment items revealed a moderate awareness among the respondents. Furthermore, data showed a positive correlation between the self-assessment ratings and the formal assessment scores. In conclusion, the findings manifested that the higher the perceived GFL awareness, the higher the actual GFL awareness and vice versa. Henceforth, this study recommends the integration of GFL competencies in ALS Senior High School language instructions and daily lessons in order to promote inclusivity and gender equity among learners, teachers, and other clientele.

Keywords: *gender-fair language, alternative learning system, gender equity, gender inclusivity, gender-neutral terms, gender and development*

INTRODUCTION

Language can reflect one's attitudes and stereotypes, especially when it comes to gender (Natsir et al., 2025). Biases in language which favour men over women often lead to less opportunities for females in that culture. In the same way, the use of linguistic stereotypes for minorities, such as women and the LGBTQ+ community, often leads to higher risks and dangers for them in society. Current related literatures, such as Young (2023), posit that language reforms can be used as a tool to combat gender stereotypes and biases. This is where the idea of Gender-Fair Language (GFL) takes root.

The use of non-discriminatory and non-biased language whether it be in the context of work, education, or society in general promotes gender sensitivity. This is why in the global scheme, UNESCO promotes GFL through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which promotes gender equality; in the Philippines, the constitution upholds the fight against discrimination through Republic Act 9710: Magna Carta for Women; and in

the Department of Education, all children are protected by DO no. 40, s. 2012: DepEd Child Protection Policy, especially when it comes to their sexual orientation and gender identity.

The need for language reforms and the inclusion of Gender-Fair Language in the basic K-12 curriculum has been backed by adequate studies. However, the gaps among these studies lie in the marginalized population of Alternative Learning System (ALS) learners, especially the ones undertaking the fairly-recent Senior High School level of the program. As a developing institution, the ALS Senior High School does not have a curriculum of its own yet. It currently adapts the same K-12 curriculum as its formal school counterpart.

Theoretically, this means that out-of-school youths and adults in ALS are being exposed to the same gender-inclusive instruction as formal school students. This study is meant to address the gap by focusing on ALS Senior High School learners. As the Bureau of Alternative Education (BAE) continues to develop a curriculum suited for non-formal education learners, this study may also be used as a basis for developing language competencies aligned with the UNESCO Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality.

Literature Review

Alternative Learning System in the Present Day

Republic Act No. 11510; S. 2020 institutionalized the Alternative Learning System as a parallel program to the Department of Education's K-12 curriculum which specifically caters to out-of-school youths and adults in the Philippines. Labarrete & Tiopes (2025) states that the program is one of the innovations which lets the Philippine government adhere with the Education for All (EFA) agenda. Though it has been long-standing program in the country, it has since been further strengthened by the Alternative Learning System Act. ALS now offers a second chance at education for learners in four main levels: Basic Literacy Program (BLP), Elementary, Junior High School, and Senior High School.

In the present day, ALS caters to Filipino citizens who failed to finish basic education for various reasons, the most common of which are poverty, premature employment, early parenthood, and imprisonment. Because of this unique set-up, learners in the ALS are very diverse when it comes to age and life experiences. The curriculum for BLP to Junior High School levels is unique to ALS, with six core learning strands which act as "subjects". These six are: Communication Skills in English and Filipino, Scientific and Critical Thinking Skills, Mathematical and Problem-Solving Skills, Life and Career Skills, Understanding the Self and Society, and Digital Citizenship. Competencies often focus on real-life applications more than theories, as the learners are expected to gain skills that can help with daily life and employment purposes. According to Zulueta, et al. (2021), the main focus of ALS is to equip learners with a better sense of self-efficacy.

In the Schools Division of La Carlota City, the Alternative Learning System currently reaches all 14 barangays of the locality. In addition to catering to BLP, Elementary and Junior High School learners, the program also offers one of the pioneering Senior High School programs for out-of-school adults and children in special cases. This development is fairly new and is a rich ground for academic studies.

Gender Fair Language in Education

Kuhn (2021) simply defines Gender Fair Language (GFL) as "language that that avoids gender bias" by using different strategies like neutralization and feminization. Going even deeper, the same study claims that GFL is important as it counteracts gender bias. Using this kind of language, especially in educational settings, can help boost the visibility of women and LGBTQ+ members. It opens up bigger opportunities for them when it comes to career and societal roles by eliminating the limits that gendered words like "businessman" which sometimes corrals women into more "ladylike" jobs.

The study also provided strategies for Gender Fair Language, namely, feminization which explicitly refers to women, and neutralization which makes no reference to gender at all to promote equity. These strategies were found to be effective in decreasing the use of generic masculine words and pronouns. Conclusively, the study found that the individual exposure to Gender Fair Language not only increases one's awareness, but also increases one's motivation to use GFL in professional and casual contexts.

Learning Competencies in Gender Fair Language

Gender Fair Language is a broad topic but common competencies have emerged in related literature over the years. When it comes to developing awareness in Gender Fair Language, there are four notable competencies that can be applied or taught to learners.

The first is the use of gender-neutral terms. According to Shelley (2021), one way to become more inclusive is verbal communication is to replace gendered terms with gender neutral terms. It is as simple as swapping the word term “mankind” with “people”, and the word “waitress” with “server”. The idea is eliminating gender from language can also eliminate biases formed about gender. This way, everyone feels included when the term “people” is used, and the food service industry is not reduced as a “woman’s job” when the term “server” is used. This competency can also be used when addressing a collective group by including members who do not identify with the gender binary. Believe it or not, “men and women” or “ladies and gentlemen” are no longer inclusive when addressing a group. Instead, gender neutral alternatives like “everyone”, “all”, and “folks” can be used for inclusivity.

Second, speakers and writers can also eliminate unnecessary gendered pronouns. Even in the Philippine Constitution, the masculine pronoun “he” can be seen favored over the feminine “she”. This can be seen as an instance of gender-biased language. One way to eliminate binary gendered pronouns is to use the pronoun “they” whether it be in the plural or singular sense. Loughlin (2022) finds that using “they” can lower gender biases, and even advocates for its use in professional, educational, and legal settings to promote gender equity.

The third learning competency that can promote Gender Fair Language awareness is avoiding discriminatory language. Gender-based unequal power dynamics get more emphasized with the ubiquitous and often habitual use of gender-discriminatory language (Diazon et al., 2025). In the study cited, the researchers identified discriminatory language in Bisaya and analyzed how these words affected a person’s emotional, physiological, and mechanism states. It was found that minorities often react negatively to such language. It concluded that using such discriminatory language perpetuated gender stereotypes and further marginalized minorities. Therefore, eliminating discriminatory language and expressions such as “Man up!” in English, “Tanga-bayhana!” in Bisaya, and “Nugay inagi!” in Hiligaynon can better promote gender sensitivity and equity. The study suggests that reforming language policies in the workplace and in the school should include both staff and students to elicit a positive development. It also clearly implies that steering clear of language-based gender discrimination helps in creating a learning environment that is both equitable and inclusive.

Fourth, related literature suggests that respecting preferred pronouns and honorifics of referents can boost GFL awareness and lower gender biases. Binder (2005, as cited in Ure, 2024) produced a guide to writing focusing on the considerations for gendered pronouns in which the proponent advocated for individuals, especially instructors, to know and use preferred or lived names, pronouns, and honorifics of students, especially those who identify as transgender and non-binary. The study even presents a table of neopronouns which may be used to address non-binary folks including terms such as “ze”, “per”, and “hu”, as well as sample sentences for their correct usage. As for honorifics, the notable addition to “Mr.” and “Ms.”/” Mrs.” is the presence of “Mx.” which is a gender-neutral honorific meant to address those who exist outside and beyond the gender binary. The study also reiterates the need to ask for people’s preferred pronouns and respecting an individual’s choice.

Fifth and final, discerning LGBTQIA++ terminology with its expanding vocabulary for an inclusive and respectful scope of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression may also be taken as a competency that improves an individual’s GFL awareness. Self-definition is an act of empowerment for members of the LGBTQIA++ community. From 1900 to 2021, the vocabulary of queer terminologies continues to evolve to provide variety for its members (Thelwall et al., 2023). Due to this continuous evolution, this final competency must equip learners with updated terminologies and definitions to provide them with adequate information which may improve their GFL awareness.

It is important to note that these competencies are only the most commonly cited in current related literature, and might change or increase in the future. However, these learning competencies can still be used as a guide when building a curriculum that is gender-sensitive.

Gender and Development in the Philippines

As one of the Sustainable Development Goals for UNESCO's 2030 Agenda, gender equality has been pushed for by numerous countries in the world, including the Philippines. The country has one of the highest LGBTQ+ population in the world with roughly 11% identifying as members of the queer community (Fleck & Richter, 2026). Championed by Republic Act No. 9710: The Magna Carta of Women, the Gender and Development (GAD) Program remains as the primary tool for empowering women and eliminating biases in the classroom and workplace. Even though the Philippines is a fairly gender-affirming country, Esguerra et al. (2023) argues that the implementation of GAD policies alone do not improve gender equity all that much. This implies that the state of gender and development in this country can be further improved.

For both the Department of Education and the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology, Gender and Development seminars and trainings have been mandated annually. Specifically, for DepEd, GAD coordinators are tasked with the responsibility of gender mainstreaming, a process meant to inform both administrators, employees, students, and stakeholders about topics concerning gender. These events have provided the necessary venue for stereotypes to diminish and equity to grow in school set-ups. Integrating gender-fair concepts to lessons and discussions often lead to more inclusive learning environments which pave the way for both teachers and learners to succeed further (Copliros, 2024). In the BJMP setting, GAD initiatives are also endorsed to reduce gender gap in the workforce. It also equips administrators and officers to handle sensitive cases of LGBTQ+ inmates in the penitentiary.

There is no doubt that the Philippines is gearing towards a more gender-equal society with all the initiatives of the GAD Program. However, in this current state, further developments are required to achieve total gender equity.

The Role of Language in Shaping Attitudes and Behaviours

Language, attitudes, and behaviours cannot be separated. In language studies, the relationship among these concepts have been debated but never denied. According to Natsir et al. (2025), language shapes perception, and along with it, attitudes and behaviours. The study further discusses the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in the interrelation of language and perception. It is understood that language and thought are connected multi-directionally, which means that one can affect the other and vice versa. It is not just a tool humans use to exchange information; it is also a crucial instrument in cognitive development. The power of words can change thoughts and form cultures. Whether this formed culture is one of inclusivity or animosity depends on the kind of language that is used.

Using inclusive language that is free of bias and stereotyping can promote belongingness and even good health. In medical circles, avoiding expressions that discriminate against a patient's characteristics (i.e. ageist or sexist language) can improve their rapport with the medical professionals and even lead to better recovery (Van Wicklin, 2025). In education, the role of language has been long emphasized in the classroom in promoting inclusivity among learners and establishing good classroom management. According to Onwuka (2024), "When inclusive language is used in communication, it can make people feel included, valued, and empowered (p. 2)." This allows the researcher to conclude that incorporating Gender-Fair Language competencies into the language instruction of learners can lead to an improved learning environment.

Language is a powerful tool that can have deep-rooted effects on a person's attitudes and behaviours. From abovementioned studies, it can be deduced that using inclusive and non-biased words can shape an environment to be either conducive or destructive. Using the right words can create an environment where all individuals can thrive.

METHODS

Research Design

Being quantitative in nature, this study utilized a descriptive-comparative research design using the survey method. In gauging the respondents' self and actual awareness of Gender-Fair Language (GFL) as a whole and in terms of its specific competencies, a purely descriptive design provided adequate insights to the problems presented in the study. Descriptive studies probe into the quantitative accounts of different individuals or events without manipulating any of the variables according to Siedlecki (2021) which makes it the optimal design for this specific research topic.

Additionally, Taherdoost (2022) believes that the survey method is best used to analyze and generalize a target population's attitudes and beliefs using a designed questionnaire or adopted statistical methods. Using individual results of the respondents, the survey method can piece together viewpoints and opinions of the whole population.

Research Locale

This study investigated the Gender-Fair Language (GFL) awareness of OSYA learners in the Schools Division of La Carlota City. Presently, there are two community learning centers implementing the pilot ALS SHS classes: ALS Pilot Center and Brgy. Yubo. The ALS Pilot Center is located in Gurrea Street, Brgy. 1 Poblacion, La Carlota City, Negros Occidental. It hosts OSYA learners within the city proper and surrounding areas. Brgy. Yubo is located on the outskirts of La Carlota City, Negros Occidental, within the campus of the Yubo National High School. It caters to OSYA learners in the urban areas of the locality.

Sampling Technique

The respondents are selected from the current enrolled Grade 11 and Grade 12 learners of the two community learning centers offering ALS SHS classes. Additionally, since the study is focused on the ALS Senior High School program, the respondents are narrowed down to ALS learners enrolled in the Grade 11 and Grade 12 level during the school year 2025-2026. These learners are sub-grouped into eight (8) sections. All ALS Senior High School learners included in the study were selected regardless of age, sex, sexual orientation, years spent in the correctional facility, and other demographic profile to keep the roster as diverse as possible.

The respondents of this study were selected through a stratified sampling technique, which is best used when the total population is divided into smaller subgroups (Hayes, 2024). The specific number was defined through Slovin's formula with a margin of 0.05, which is the acceptable margin of error as determined by Bobbit (2023). In this study, each section is considered as a stratum.

From the total population of 230 students, a sample size of 145 respondents was determined and proportionally allocated across the different schools. After determining the required sample per section, respondents were selected through simple random sampling within each stratum using a random number generator. The distribution of the sample is presented below:

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents by Section in ALS Senior High School in La Carlota City

School	Section	(N)	(n)
ALS Pilot Center	Bonifacio	18	11
ALS Pilot Center	Rizal	35	22
ALS Pilot Center	Flame	41	26
ALS Pilot Center	Spark	35	22
ALS Pilot Center	Yummy	35	22
ALS Pilot Center	Splendid	19	12
Yubo National High School	ALS 11	32	20
Yubo National High School	ALS 12	15	10
	TOTAL	230	145

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2. *Extent of participants' awareness of gender-fair language (self-assessment)*

Competency	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Using Gender-Neutral Terms	4.41	0.867	High Extent
Eliminating Unnecessary Gendered Pronouns	4.42	0.896	High Extent
Avoiding Discriminatory Language	4.37	0.903	High Extent
Respecting Preferred Pronouns and Honorifics	4.50	0.814	Very High Extent
Discerning LGBTQIA++ Terminology	4.35	0.932	High Extent
Overall Awareness of Gender-Fair Language	4.41	0.780	High Extent

The table presents results addressing the second research question which looks into the extent of respondents' GFL awareness as determined through self-assessment. Through the 10-item survey, results revealed that, as a whole, the respondents reached a high extent of awareness with a score of 4.41.

Results also include data for the specific competencies by getting the average out of the two questions assigned for each competency. Out of the five identified GFL competencies, Respecting Preferred Pronouns and Honorifics garnered the highest self-assessment awareness score of 4.50, placing it in the interpretation of very high extent. Respondents scored lowest on the competency of Discerning LGBTQIA++ Terminology with a score of 4.35.

This may suggest that the respondents have difficulty with technical terminologies relating to gender-fair language, however, they still rate their awareness of such terms at a high extent. This result may be regarded rather positively from an educational standpoint when connected to the findings of Tarrayo (2023) which states that learners with high awareness of gender competencies exhibit a high level of critical thinking skills as well.

However, it is important to note that these results only reflect the respondents' self-perceived awareness of gender-fair language. It might not coincide with their actual GFL awareness which is determined through the researcher-made 20-item formative assessment.

Table 3. *Extent of participants' awareness of gender-fair language (formative assessment)*

Competency	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Using Gender-Neutral Terms	55.9	33.6	Moderate
Eliminating Unnecessary Gendered Pronouns	57.8	30.3	Moderate
Avoiding Discriminatory Language	58.1	28.8	Moderate
Respecting Preferred Pronouns and Honorifics	46.4	34.5	Moderate
Discerning LGBTQIA++ Terminology	45.5	30.1	Moderate
Overall Awareness of Gender-Fair Language	52.7	24.1	Moderate

The table above presents the data answering the third research question which probes into the actual Gender-Fair Language awareness of the respondents as determined through a formative assessment. To obtain this data, the results focused on the second part of the questionnaire which is the 20-item formative assessment. All results pointed to a moderate awareness of the Gender-Fair Language overall and when taken in terms of each individual competency.

These results hint that there is still room for improvement when it comes to the GFL awareness of ALS Senior High School learners. Higher extent of awareness may yield higher scores. Since awareness of language affects attitudes and practice, the findings uphold the report on the Global Gender Gap Index (2023) which ranks the Philippines as the 16th in the world when it comes to gender equality.

Table 4. *Correlation analysis between perceived gender-fair language awareness and actual gender-fair language awareness*

Variables	Correlation Coefficient	p-value	Decision	Conclusion
Perceived gender-fair language awareness and actual gender-fair language awareness	0.288	<.001	Reject Ho	Significant

In this final table, perceived GFL awareness and actual GFL awareness are analyzed for any possible correlation. Spearman rank correlation revealed a significant weak correlation between perceived and actual gender-fair language awareness, $r = 0.288$, $p < .001$. This suggests that the higher the perceived gender fair language awareness, the higher the actual gender fair language and vice versa. However, relationship between variables is weak.

The results of the Spearman rank correlation align with the findings of Kuhn (2021), which claims that exposure to GFL concepts and increases gender-fair practices which boosts the use of inclusive language; Natsir, et al. (2025), which states that language and thought are interrelated; and Tarrayo (2023), which posits that high awareness of GFL competencies enhances both critical thinking skills of learners and inclusivity of the learning environment.

These findings and analyses have significant implications for language instruction in the Alternative Learning System Senior High School. Learners can benefit from integrating Gender-Fair Language competencies into their lessons in Oral Communication, English for Academic and Professional Purposes, and other related studies. Developing a work plan for teachers to deliver GFL-integrated lessons may be pertinent in creating a more inclusive learning environment (Colipros, 2024) and more empowered learners (Onwuka, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Data obtained from the survey questionnaire revealed that ALS Senior High School Learners revealed that respondents scored themselves highly aware of gender-fair language, while scoring moderate scores overall and when classified in specific competencies according to the formative assessment. Finally, results show that perceived GFL awareness and actual GFL awareness are correlated. This means that respondents who felt confident in their self-assessed awareness scored higher in the formative test determining actual awareness, and vice versa. In line with these findings, it is recommended to include ALS teachers and implementers in gender-based trainings, seminars, and learning action cell (LAC) sessions. These sessions may include creating lesson plans and session guides that integrate Gender-Fair Language competencies into daily lessons. Teachers and implementers are also implored to develop contextualized modules, learning activity sheets (LAS), and/or worksheets integrating the listed competencies in this study. Learning facilitators greatly impact learners' awareness; therefore, it is pertinent to train ALS teachers and implementers to be adept in integrating GFL competencies in language instructions.

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