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A Critical Discourse Analysis Of Gendered Communication In English At Kohat University Of Science And Technology

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ABSTRACT

This study examines gendered communication in English at the department of English at Kohat University of Science and Technology using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis model. Findings show that male participants frequently use direct, assertive, evaluative language and turn-taking dominance. On the other hand, female participants rely on hedging, politeness, reflective reasoning, and mediated contributions. Faculty discourse demonstrates professional awareness but still reflects underlying gendered dynamics. The study contributes to existing scholarship by providing context-specific evidence from a Pashtoon sociocultural setting. The analysis indicates that hybrid learning environments present both opportunities and challenges for female students in navigating cultural expectations. Academic and local institutional practices were also identified as factors that affect communication styles, reinforcing the visibility of dominant voices. The study emphasizes the necessity for an equitable learning environment where both genders can participate confidently and without social pressure. Overall, the research highlights the importance of incorporating gender-responsive strategies in higher education to promote balanced communicative practices.

Keywords: Gendered Communication, CDA, Fairclough, Academic Discourse, Sociocultural Factors, Gendered Participation, Discourse Strategies.

Introduction:

Language is a powerful tool. It does not merely reflect but also shapes social realities, including those related to gender dynamics. Language in educational settings is not only a neutral means of communication, but it is also a dynamic space where power dynamics, ideologies, and identities are formed. In higher education, the way we talk in classrooms, engage in academic discussions, and interact with teachers does more than share knowledge. The landscape of higher education in Pakistan adds another layer of complexity to these issues. In most universities, including Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST), English is used as the language of instruction. Yet, sociocultural traditions, patriarchal structures, and unequal access to educational resources significantly influence how gendered communication unfolds (Shah & Pathan, 2016). In academic settings, these differences can be seen in how male students tend to



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dominate discussions, while female students may choose to acquire more cautious communication styles.

Taking gendered communication at KUST opens up a conversation about academic participation, equity, and empowerment. As higher education in Pakistan works towards achieving gender balance, it is important to identify the ways language can perpetuate inequality. This study aims to examine the factors that lead to gender dominance and the strategies that individuals use to navigate power dynamics in English communication. The insights gained here could play an important role in shaping policy reforms, developing gender-sensitive teaching methods, and promoting more equitable communication environments in higher education.

The research is grounded on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which examines the connections between text (description), discursive practice (interpretation), and sociocultural practice (explanation), looking into how language represents and creates social identities and power relations. These three levels correspond to analytical stages of description, interpretation, and explanation. This model facilitates a transition from micro-analysis of language to macro-analysis of power and ideology (Fairclough, 1995). This model will describe linguistic choices in students' and faculty members' discourse. It will also interpret how these choices are shaped during interaction. Additionally, it will also explain how institutional norms and gender power dynamics in academia are influenced and reinforced by these communication patterns.

Statement of the Problem

This research study investigates that men take the lead in verbal exchanges within academic environments. This dynamic can lead to women being less visible and influential in classroom discussions, departmental meetings, and research conversations (Infante et al., 2018). While there is a wealth of international research on gendered communication in academic settings, the higher education landscape in Pakistan is missing localized studies that examine these dynamics in English. At KUST, a multilingual institution, there has not been a thorough study of CDA to examine power and dominance expression in real-time conversations. Without this understanding, the inequalities in classroom interactions might persist, reinforcing societal hierarchies through everyday language practices (Faiz, Pervaiz, & Arshad, 2021). That is why this research aims to take a closer look at the language and communication styles of both male and female participants at KUST. We are particularly interested in how these styles reflect and reinforce gender power dynamics. By understanding these patterns, we can provide valuable insights for language educators, policymakers, and curriculum designers, helping to create more inclusive and fair academic environments.

Research Questions

What factors influence the dominance of male or female participants in English communication within academic settings at KUST?

What discursive strategies do male and female participants employ to assert dominance and power in English communication at KUST?

Research Objectives

To identify and analyze the factors that contribute to gendered dominance in English communication within academic settings at KUST.

To examine the discursive strategies used by male and female participants to assert dominance and power in English communication at KUST.



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Rationale of the Study

Mostly previous research/studies in Pakistan have concentrated on how gender is represented in textbooks (Jabeen & Fatima, 2021). However, there has been a lack of focus on spoken English communication within higher education. This oversight creates a gap in our understanding of how gendered communication unfolds in academic discussions in conservative regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Ali & Ullah, 2023). KUST offers a distinctive setting for this kind of research, as it merges academic English with local cultural expectations. English is regarded as a symbol of knowledge and authority. Its usage is influenced by traditional notions of modesty and respect (Khan & Ahmad, 2022; Ahmad et al., 2025). Thus, examining how male and female students and faculty communicate in English can help examine the way power and culture influence gender roles in higher education (Rahman, 2023).

Literature Review

The literature review examines gendered communication and power within academic environments. It is the role of language as a social practice. CDA integrates linguistic analysis with sociocultural interpretation. Fairclough's (2021) three-dimensional model, comprising textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice, serves as a foundational framework. It explores how men and women communicate differently due to socialization, cultural traditions, and institutional structures that define what constitutes "appropriate" speech for each gender (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2021; Sajjad et al., 2023). Early studies such as Lakoff's *Language and Women's Place* (1975) established a foundation for understanding how women's linguistic behavior, characterized by politeness, tag questions, hedges, and rising intonation, was socially constructed to reflect subordination and deference.

Fairclough (2021) describes power in discourse as both textual and social, meaning it operates through linguistic choices as well as through the social structures that give authority to voices. In academic settings, such as university classrooms, discursive power is associated with those who possess institutional authority (teachers, senior faculty) or social privilege (men in patriarchal contexts). In the context of gendered communication, discursive strategies serve as a window into how power asymmetries are enacted and resisted in everyday talk. Numerous studies have shown that male and female speakers employ different strategies to achieve communicative goals, often reflecting underlying gender ideologies (Holmes & Stubbe, 2021; Tannen, 2022; Habib et al., 2024). Reisigl and Wodak's (2021) *Discourse-Historical Approach* emphasizes that discursive strategies can be categorized into types such as nomination, how participants are named or referred to, predication, how they are described, argumentation, whose viewpoint is foregrounded, and intensification/mitigation, how statements are strengthened or softened.

Early studies in the 1970s adopted deficit models, portraying women's speech as lacking authority or strength compared to men's. Later, different models emphasized that men and women simply have distinct communicative styles shaped by different subcultural experiences. In recent years, scholars have moved beyond these models towards discourse-oriented approaches, which view gender not as a fixed biological or social trait but as something that is performed and negotiated through interaction (Talbot, 2021). From this perspective, communication becomes a site where gender identities and power relations are actively constructed and contested.

Culture plays a defining role in shaping how gendered communication is enacted and interpreted (Shakeel et al., 2025; Gul et al., 2023). The norms, values, and expectations



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embedded in a society influence how men and women express themselves, the degree of directness they use, and the extent of power or deference they display in interactions (Habib et al., 2025). In Pakistan, where traditional and collectivist values intersect with global academic practices, cultural influences significantly shape gendered communication patterns within educational institutions. This imbalance is reinforced by discursive practices that privilege male voices, for example, valuing assertiveness and directness as markers of authority while associating politeness or empathy with weakness (Khalid, 2025; Gul et al., 2022).

Recent studies using CDA have revealed that discourse continues to perpetuate gender inequality within higher education through classroom interactions, faculty meetings, and academic writing (Malik et al., 2023; Bibi, 2023; Ilyas et al., 2025; Qudus et al., 2025). Such analyses demonstrate how gendered norms are reproduced linguistically, through interruption patterns, topic control, or differential forms of address. However, CDA has been applied to educational discourse globally, there remains a notable gap in research on spoken English interactions in Pakistani universities, particularly within the Pashtoon sociocultural context. Exploring this gap is vital to understanding how local traditions, power hierarchies, and cultural expectations shape gendered communication in academic environments that use English as the medium of instruction.

Theoretical Framework

The researcher utilized Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model (textual description, discursive practice, and socio-cultural practice) to explore the factors that dominate conversations and also the strategies used by the participants to dominate discussions. It views language as a social practice that both reflects and shapes power relations.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach by utilizing focus group and semi structured interviews with two selected groups (faculties and students). Using CDA framework, inspired by Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model (textual description, discursive practice, and socio-cultural practice), will be used for the analysis of the data. It aligns with the goal of the study of uncovering gendered dominance created and maintained through language in academic settings (Fairclough, 2023).

Data Sampling

The research was conducted at Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST), located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The research used purposive sampling to choose participants who could offer valuable insights into gendered communication (Etikan & Bala, 2021). Data was gathered through focus group interviews, which included two focus groups: one of the faculties and one of the students. It promotes interaction among participants and helps uncover the discursive strategies they use in real-time (Krueger & Casey, 2021).

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis follows Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model (text, discourse practice, social practice). Faculty participants are anonymized as requested: female participants are F1, F2, F3 and male participants are M1, M2, M3, while student participants are anonymized as requested: female participants are F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F6 and male participants are M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6. Below, I (the interviewer) present



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(a) a brief note on participants and procedure, and (b) the CDA at the three Fairclough levels.

Dimension 1

Analysis of Faculty Focus Group Interview

Academic, Social, and Cultural Factors and Strategies

This section analyzes gendered communication patterns among faculty using Fairclough's three-dimensional model. The context of KUST within Pashtoon society is central, as norms of hierarchy, modesty, and authority shape how male and female teachers discuss AI, learning, and classroom roles.

Academic Factors and Strategies

Across discussions, men and women agreed that AI can support learning, but differed in how they positioned control, creativity, and responsibility.

Key Factors

Learning outcomes and critical thinking: Males stressed structure, verification, and supervision; females emphasized creativity, reflection, and cognitive growth.

Teacher guidance and mediation: Male teachers highlighted scaffolding and monitoring; female teachers encouraged autonomy balanced with ethical reflection.

AI use in academic tasks: Males focused on efficiency and systematic extraction of information; females focused on analysis, checking accuracy, and quality.

Training and policies: Males called for institutional training and clear rules; females highlighted ethics and students' awareness of consequences.

Discursive Strategies Observed

Males: declarative certainty, examples showing efficiency, authoritative tone.

Females: hedging, caution, conditional phrasing, emphasis on reflection and responsibility.

Social Factors and Strategies

Social interaction patterns showed clear gendered dynamics.

Key Factors

Collaboration and teamwork: Men framed group work through supervision and control; women linked it to empathy, sharing, and social learning.

Dependence vs autonomy: Males presented AI as helpful but requiring monitoring; females warned about laziness, shortcuts, and maturity.

Policies and institutional support: Both genders referenced rules and AI checks, but from different angles, procedural (males) versus ethical/social (females).

Participation patterns: Male speakers often dominated turns and interrupted; female speakers tended to be reflective, cautious, and polite.

Discursive Strategies



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Males: turn-taking dominance, interruptions, direct evaluation.

Females: contextualization, hedging, appeals to responsibility and empathy.

Cultural Factors and Strategies

Cultural expectations strongly shaped how AI, learning, and authority were discussed.

Key Factors

Gendered authority and public roles: Male faculty projected leadership and confidence; female faculty framed ideas through care, honesty, and ethical guidance.

Cultural norms and technology: Men emphasized competence and structured learning; women pointed to isolation, unequal access, and social consequences, especially for girls.

Local educational practices: Men referenced institutional policies; women stressed integrity, fairness, and adapting AI use to cultural realities.

Discursive Strategies

Males: declarative, confident statements, leadership framing.

Females: hedging, ethical reflection, and conditional caution aligned with modesty and respect.

Dimension 2

Analysis of Student Focus Group Interview

1. Academic Factors and Strategies

Male and female students agreed that physical classes are generally more effective, but their reasoning and discursive styles differed.

Key Factors

Perceived learning and discipline: Males emphasized seriousness, direct outcomes, and accountability. Females used hedging and reflection, acknowledging multiple perspectives and potential online benefits.

Participation and comfort: Males prioritized visibility and confidence in face-to-face settings; females valued psychological comfort and conditional participation via chat or online platforms.

Interaction with teachers: Males stressed supervision and attention control; females emphasized emotional connection, inclusivity, and preparation.

Technology and access: Males were pragmatic about devices and connectivity; females highlighted sociocultural barriers, particularly gendered restrictions on mobility and access.

Discursive Strategies

Males: direct evaluative statements, declarative certainty, topic initiation.

Females: hedging, conditional phrasing, contextualized examples, relational awareness.

Social Factors and Strategies

Gendered patterns were evident in classroom interaction, peer dynamics, and mobility.

Key Factors

Gendered comfort and safety: Males valorized public confidence and visibility; females emphasized protection, safety, and gradual engagement.



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Social motivation: Male motivation was performance- and competition-driven; female motivation relied on relational support and classroom atmosphere.

Mobility and access: Male students experienced unrestricted movement; females faced cultural limitations affecting online and in-person participation.

Mixed-gender interaction: Males treated co-presence as normal; females engaged cautiously, often waiting for teacher cues.

Household expectations: Female students referenced domestic responsibilities as constraints, reflecting gendered labor division.

Discursive Strategies

Males: turn-taking dominance, normative claims, minimal elaboration.

Females: hedging, contextualized narratives, cautious problematization, emphasis on safety.

Cultural Factors and Strategies

Pashtoon cultural norms strongly shape student discourse, particularly regarding **haya** (modesty) and **namoos** (honor).

Key Factors

Modesty and public voice: Females use hedging, softeners, and indirect phrasing; males speak assertively and directly.

Honor and protection: Females frame participation to minimize social scrutiny; males normalize public mobility and assertiveness.

Gender hierarchy in mixed gender talk: Males control turn-taking and speak confidently; females negotiate participation and often wait for teacher invitations.

Cultural restrictions: Female participation is constrained by family expectations; male students experience minimal cultural barriers.

Discursive Strategies

Males: direct declarative speech, topic control, interruptions, confident English.

Females: hedging, politeness, mediated references (family/friends), cautious English, strategic silence.

Dimension 3

Comparative Analysis: Faculty vs Students at KUST

This section presents a comparative analysis of faculty and student focus group interviews using Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework (textual, discursive practice, sociocultural practice). The analysis spans academic, social, and cultural factors, highlighting how gendered communication and power dynamics are shaped by Pashtoon cultural norms and institutional context.

Overall finding: Both groups reproduce gendered norms: males deploy direct, authoritative discourse, while females use hedging, relational framing, and mediated examples. However, the intensity and function differ: female faculty exercise negotiated professional agency, whereas female students exhibit strong cultural restraint, relying on mediated/online channels.



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Methodological Note

Data from faculty and student groups were treated as parallel CDA outputs. Comparisons were made like-for-like across the three levels (textual/micro, discursive/meso, sociocultural/macro) and factor categories (academic, social, cultural, local), grounded in the evidence (utterances and described strategies).

Textual Level (Micro): Words, Modality, and Linguistic Features

Group	Gender	Features & Examples	Interpretation
Faculty	Male	Strong deontic/epistemic modality (“must”, “need”), declaratives asserting expertise (“AI reduces creativity”)	Assert institutional authority; confidence framed as professional knowledge
Faculty	Female	Mitigated modality, inclusive pronouns (“maybe”, “we should”), pedagogical language	Strategic politeness; negotiating authority while maintaining professional stance
Students	Male	Direct evaluative claims (“Physical is better”), short declaratives, humor, dismissive remarks	Peer-focused authority; confidence reflects social entitlement
Students	Female	Hedging, long reflective turns, conditional phrasing, third-party references (“my cousin said”)	Protective strategy to avoid cultural sanction and preserve family honor

Interpretation:

The form of gendered language is consistent across faculty and students: **males assert, females hedge**. Function differs: faculty females use hedging **strategically**, while student females use it **defensively**. Male assertiveness indexes **institutional authority** in faculty, and **social entitlement** in students.

Discursive Practice (Meso): Turn-Taking and Intertextuality

Group	Gender	Features	Interpretation
Faculty	Male	Initiate topics, managerial/academic jargon, hierarchical flow	Institutional authority; topic leadership
Faculty	Female	Reformulate male points, align collaboratively, inclusive discourse	Exercise professional agency; pedagogical negotiation
Students	Male	Dominant turn-taking, interruptions, humor	Peer authority; cultural entitlement
Students	Female	Mediated narratives (family/friends), reliance on online/chat	Defensive strategy; limited institutional authority

Observations:

Institutional role enables female faculty to **negotiate male assertions**.

Student females leverage **online/typed participation** to reduce visibility risk.

Intertextuality: faculty refer to **policy, pedagogy, research**, while students cite **community/family experiences**.



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Sociocultural Practice (Macro): Ideology, Norms, and Cultural Reproduction

Group	Gender	Features	Interpretation
Faculty	Male	Institutional patriarchy visible, professional confidence	Cultural norms tempered by professional authority
Faculty	Female	Moderate modesty, assertiveness within professional norms	Cultural negotiation; professional agency
Students	Male	Public mobility, peer networks, entitlement	Cultural comfort; unrestricted visibility
Students	Female	Strong haya/namoos influence, family surveillance, limited mobility	Cultural constraint dominates; speech highly mediated

Interpretation:

Macro-level norms affect both groups, but **students experience stronger constraints**. Female faculty can partially resist norms using professional legitimacy; student females remain culturally constrained.

Comparative Academic Factors

Factor	Male Faculty	Female Faculty	Male Students	Female Students
Learning & Discipline	Academic rigor, supervision, control	Student-centered, inclusive pedagogy	Discipline, accountability	Comfort, preparation, safe participation
Technology & Online Learning	Viewed critically (AI reduces creativity)	Consider hybrid approaches	Prefer physical; online taken less seriously	Use online/chat to reduce anxiety and participate
Strategy	Direct evaluation, declaratives, topic initiation	Hedging, inclusive pronouns, pedagogical reframing	Direct evaluation, humor, dismissive remarks	Hedging for self-protection, mediated references

Interpretation:

Male dominance persists in both groups; female faculty **strategically hedge**; female students **hedge for protection**.

Comparative Social Factors

Factor	Male Faculty	Female Faculty	Male Students	Female Students
Social Authority	Lead topics, confident	Polite, collaborative, maintain teaching expertise	Interruptions, humor, public presence	Short utterances, mediated participation, cautious
Confidence	Institutional authority	Professional negotiation	Cultural entitlement	Cultural constraint; fear of



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Mobility & Safety Strategy	Not limited Direct, assertive	Moderate concern Polite alignment, professional reframing	Unrestricted Dominant speech, minimal hedging	misinterpretation Constrained by family/community Hedging, chat/online channels, indirect references
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Interpretation:

Faculty females exercise discursive agency within professional norms; student females rely on defensive, risk averse strategies. Male assertiveness is refined by institutional authority for faculty, socially oriented for students.

Comparative Cultural Factors

Factor	Male Faculty	Female Faculty	Male Students	Female Students
Modesty/Haya	Direct, culturally appropriate	Polite, strategic assertiveness	Comfortable visibility	Avoid eye contact, indirect speech
Honor/Namoos	Direct opinion, culturally accepted	Respectful, professional	Socially validated mobility	Strong restrictions, cultural monitoring
Participation Norms	Unrestricted	Negotiated assertiveness	Public presence normalized	Mediated/online participation
Strategy	Direct speech, confident English	Inclusive, explanation-based soft power	Directness, public confidence	Hedging, third-party references, cautious English

Interpretation:

Cultural ideology shapes female students' speech more intensely than faculty. Female faculty partially resist norms; student females comply fully. Male strategies demonstrate cultural comfort in visibility across groups.

Power Dynamics, Gendered Agency, and Resistance

Role	Control of Floor	Forms of Resistance
Male Faculty	High – institutional authority	Direct assertion, agenda-setting
Male Students	High – cultural entitlement	Peer dominance, humor, social norms
Female Faculty	Negotiated – institutional legitimacy	Reframing male assertions, inclusive pedagogy
Female Students	Constrained – cultural/family limits	Online/chat participation, hybrid advocacy, mediated narratives



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Summary:

Male authority persists across faculty and students but manifests differently: professional vs social.

Female faculty exercise strategic, institutionally sanctioned agency.

Female students rely on safe, mediated strategies, reflecting the strongest cultural and social constraints.

Conclusion

This study concludes that gendered communication in English at KUST reflects a complex interplay of academic, social, cultural, and ideological factors. Male dominance in discourse is sustained through linguistic assertiveness and institutional authority, while female participants employ politeness and strategic silence as tools of survival and subtle resistance. However, the emergence of online learning environments and the growing presence of women in academia indicate an evolving discourse toward equity and empowerment. Through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, this research highlights that language is not only a reflection of gender relations but also a potential instrument for social change.

Hence, by fostering critical linguistic awareness, educational institutions in Pashtoon and wider Pakistani contexts can move toward a more inclusive, dialogic, and gender-balanced academic culture. The study investigated two focus group interviews, one comprising faculty members and the other comprising students at KUST, to identify patterns of gendered communication in English. The study employed qualitative research design and analyzed data through Fairclough's CDA model, focusing on how language use reflects and reproduces power relations and cultural ideologies. The analysis revealed that male participants across both groups dominated discourse by initiating turns, interrupting, and asserting authority, while female participants adopted politeness, hedging, and supportive strategies to maintain social harmony. However, in the case of students, particularly during online classes, female participants showed emerging agency by participating more through chat and text-based communication, suggesting a shift in traditional gender norms. The findings underscore that gendered discourse at KUST is not only shaped by academic hierarchies but also deeply influenced by Pashtoon cultural values, where modesty, respect, and gender segregation define communicative behavior. Nevertheless, evolving educational technologies and global academic exposure are gradually enabling discursive transformation.

Recommendations

Comparative Studies: Future research can compare gendered communication across multiple universities or between urban and rural contexts in Pakistan.

Longitudinal Research: Examining changes in discourse patterns over time could show how gendered communication evolves with digital literacy and policy reforms.

Inclusion of Classroom Observation: Triangulating interviews with classroom discourse data would strengthen the validity of findings.

Cross-Linguistic Analysis: Comparative studies of English, Urdu, and Pashto discourse could reveal how gendered meanings shift across languages.



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