

## EXAMINING ENGLISH PROFICIENCY VARIATIONS BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE STUDENTS IN THAILAND

**Matthew Rudd**

*matthew.rudd@outlook.com*

English Language Center, Mahanakorn University of Technology, Thailand  
140 Chueam Samphan Rd, Khwaeng Krathum Rai, Khet Nong Chok,  
Krung Thep Maha Nakhon 10530, Thailand

---

**Article History:**

Received:  
August 5, 2018

Revised:  
September 18, 2018

Accepted:  
December 25, 2018

---

**Corresponding Author:**

*matthew.rudd@outlook.com*

**Abstract:** The central objective of this study was to investigate the influence of gender on English language proficiency scores among Thai students in Bangkok, Thailand. To bring this research ambition to fruition, a mixed methods research design was utilised to collate qualitative and quantitative data. The former was gathered from interviews with 20 well-established educators to canvass their perceptions regarding the potential role of gender in students' English language proficiency levels. The quantitative data involved t-test analyses (0.05) of students' formal English examination results from three separate sample clusters (N = 863), which included: (1) senior high school students (n = 72); (2) third year private university students (n = 684); and, (3) first year students at a government university (n = 107). The findings disclosed that (1) English teachers distinguished girls as ostensibly more attentive and more highly motivated; (2) female students' English proficiency scores were significantly higher than their male counterparts across both university clusters, and, marginally higher at the high school level; and therefore, (3) the students' formal examination results added firm support the educators' perception that female students demonstrate greater proficiency in English due to exhibiting higher degrees of motivation and focus.

**Keywords – Gender, Perception, Motivation,  
Variability, Proficiency**

---

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the theories posited by prominent academics proclaiming female students' greater linguistic acumen, the persisting issue is the lack of publicly available research deriving from trust-worthy sources. This study aims to provide a veridical account of educators' perceptions of gender differences in English language attainments, bolstered by in-depth statistical analyses of language performance variations between male and female students. This study examines these respective variations across a diverse sample population (high school, private university and government university) comprising a total of 863 students in the Thai capital.

From as early as infancy, research has shown that female infants produce more cohesive language than their male counterparts (Bornstein, Haynes, Painter & Genevro, 2000). Furthermore, girls learn to talk at an earlier stage (Murray, Johnson & Peters, 1990), acquire vocabulary at a quicker rate, and are able to use language more creatively and spontaneously (Roulstone, Loader & Northstone, 2002).

In support of these statements, research findings from a pan-European study comprising ten language communities (N = 13,783), published in the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* (2012, vol. 30, pp.326 – 343), indicated that girls' early communicative gestures, productive vocabulary and word combinations were more advanced than those noted among boys. While the results displayed a large degree of variance across all communities, the same level of significance was observed between girls and boys in every case, regardless of nationality, language or cultural setting.

In school years, ascertaining gender differences in students' preferences and attitudes towards learning English as a second language has proven to be a complex matter. Firstly, Holder (2005) claimed that his research findings in Switzerland determined English to be the *only* 'gender-neutral' language, unlike French and German, in which girls consistently outperformed their male peers. One plausible explanation is that foreign language study is generally perceived as a feminine domain, while maths and physics are viewed as more masculine subject areas (Holder 2005; Eisenberg et al., 1996).

Carr and Pauwels (2006) posit that certain foreign languages can be categorised as being masculine or feminine, for example, French on all accounts is viewed as a feminine subject, which is also largely applicable to Spanish, Italian, and perhaps German; whereas Chinese, Japanese, Greek and Russian have earned a more masculine classification. Similarly, Dörnyei's (2006) research also suggests that certain languages appeal to different genders. Consistent with the afore-mentioned groupings, French and Italian were strongly labelled as feminine, while Russian, Japanese, Chinese, and in this case

German, were of greater interest to male scholars; nonetheless, the categorisation of English also appeared more complex. In 1993 English was found to be equally as popular among both genders, but by 1999 it had become more appealing to male students until 2004, when renewed research findings suggested a convergence back to more neutral stance (Dörnyei et al., 2006).

Dörnyei et al. (2006) found that in secondary school, girls in Hungary scored higher across all motivational variables, displaying greater *integrativeness* - a greater appreciation for L2 culture, and greater intent to communicate with native speakers of the L2 language in future. Similarly, Mori and Gobel (2006) also found this to be the case among Japanese EFL students, in that females showed greater interest in cultural aspects such as lifestyle and greater volition to converse with target language speakers. In concert with these revelations, a recent language survey carried out by Busuu (2017), a globally renowned language learning resource site, revealed that female L2 learners are in fact four times more likely to communicate with native speakers.

A number of years before these findings come to light, De Bie (1987) proposed that girls' response improves significantly when class structures promote communicative language learning, and, in the same vein, Shucard, Shucard and Thomas (1998) accentuate that interaction plays a significant role in girls' language acquisition. PortaLinguarum (6<sup>th</sup> June, 2006) analysed research related literature from Europe, Latin America and East Asia, and the constant observation was that females' study habits were more structured, organised and varied than those of their male peers.

Elaborating on the above, a study at Northwestern University in the USA (2008) exposed the neurobiological reasons explicating why girls appear to respond more positively to language-related tasks than their male counterparts. Magnetic Resonance Imaging scans showed that girls' brains are more active in regions used for language encoding, unlike boys' brains, which demonstrate greater activity in the regions related to visual and aural functions, suggesting that boys learn most efficiently through visual means and repeated listening, and that boys require sensory support to process input. Whereas, brain-behaviour correlations demonstrated that girls' cerebral activity was shown to be more dynamic in the language areas of the brain, as activation in frontal and temporal regions were bilaterally stronger.

Several decades prior to the claims and findings hitherto discussed, Powell (1979) had long proclaimed girls' superiority in *all aspects of the linguistic process*, adding that boys' performance was inhibited by girls' higher aptitude and greater levels of self-

confidence; a firm assertion this paper will empirically test in the context of EFL in Bangkok, Thailand.

In line with the literature discussed, the this research paper hypothesises that teachers are expected to associate greater levels of English proficiency with female students, and that female students are expected to perform to significantly higher levels than their male counterparts across all sample clusters. Furthermore, owing to the level of qualifications and experience of the teachers, their perceptions are expected to be firmly supported by the students' examination results.

## **METHOD**

In the academic year June 2018-2019, this study utilised a mixed method research design to gather qualitative and quantitative forms of data to examine the interplay of gender in the standard of English proficiency levels. Firstly, for the collection of qualitative data, 20 highly qualified English language teachers were interviewed in Bangkok to canvass their perceptions regarding potential differences in English proficiency owing to gender, along with their respective rationale. The second phase involved collating quantitative data from three separate sample clusters totalling 863 students. The first cluster consisted of high school students ( $n = 72$ ), across three separate classes from grades 10, 11 and 12; the second subgroup comprised third year students studying at a private university located in the peripheral regions of the capital ( $n = 684$ ); and, the third subgroup included first year students from the faculty of pharmaceutical science studying at a government university ( $n = 107$ ), located in an adjacent province to the capital.

### ***Teacher interviews***

The preliminary stage of the study utilised qualitative research instrumentation to interview 20 English language teachers (face-to-face or by telephone) to determine profiles, backgrounds and to discuss perceived variations in English language proficiency as a function of gender. Subsequently, teacher responses were coded into five separate categories; acumen, motivation, attitude, attentiveness and participation.

The researcher paid close attention to teacher profiles, targeting professionals currently teaching in Thailand with extensive work experience in the capital, and, were highly qualified academically. Preliminary observations indicated that the vast majority of EFL teachers in Thailand are male, and most local Thai English teachers are female, therefore, a deliberate effort was made to ensure a balanced variation of demographics accounting for

age, gender, nationality, experience and current place of work.

***Sample 1 -Senior high school students (n = 72)***

These students were currently studying on an Intense English Program (IEP) at a well-reputed government secondary school in Bangkok. The sample was demographically balanced (girls = 37, boys = 35) and was made up of three separate classes across three grade levels:

Grade 10: n = 25;(females = 12, males = 13)

Grade 11: n = 21; (females = 10, males = 11)

Grade 12: n = 26; (females = 15, males = 11)

The syllabus of the IEP involves a mixture of situational-grammar based teaching which is also supported by communicative language tasks, inclusive of developmental reading, role-plays, presentations and discussions. Students are assessed across four forms of formal testing, which include speaking tests, creative writing, core grammar skills and reading comprehension.

High school examinations are graded according to the following marking scheme:

Percentage	<49%	50%	60%	70%	80%>
Grade	<b>F</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>A</b>

***Sample 2 -Private university students (n = 684)***

Within this sample females broadly outnumbered males (females = 396, males = 288), and the sample cluster included students from three separate faculties, which displayed varying demographic imbalances:

Business Administration: n=378(females = 282, males = 96)

Information Technology: n= 201 (females = 39, males = 162)

Veterinary Medicine: n= 105 (females = 75, males = 30)

The students were in their third year of study and pursue English courses structured towards vocational purposes, and the syllabus is typically made up of work-related texts, authentic scenarios and presentations. The assessment criteria consist of two written examinations (also inclusive of reading comprehension) and a speaking test.

The grading criteria at university level is as follows:

Percentage	<30%	35%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%>
Grade	<b>F</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>D+</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>C+</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>B+</b>	<b>A</b>

At the majority of private universities in Thailand, entrance examinations are not required for most mainstream subjects (business and I.T in this case), however, there are strict governmental requirements in place for veterinary medicine courses, as the number of yearly admissions is restricted across the country, and only six universities offer degrees in this discipline.

### ***Sample 3 -Government university students(n = 107)***

This sample cluster was relatively well-balanced demographically (females = 63, males = 44) and consisted of students who were in their first year of study in pharmaceutical science. Unlike private institutions, most academic disciplines at government universities select and sort students according to entrance examination results. The formal examination criteria for English language assessments are largely akin to that described in the private university; which involve two formal examinations (mid-term and end-term) and a short speaking test.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The initial research question was to establish the teacher profiles and ascertain their perceptions on the role of gender in English proficiency variation and their supporting rationale. The validity of their statements was subsequently compared with the students' examination results.

### **Findings**

The teacher profiles in terms of age, gender, experience and qualifications were as follows:

1. The age of the respondents ranged from 30 to 55 (average: 36.8 yrs.).
2. Out of the 20 teachers surveyed, 7 were female, 13 were male, and, collectively represented 8 nations, as displayed below:

Philippines: **5** ( $f = 3, m = 2$ )

UK: **4** ( $m = 4$ )

USA: **4** ( $f = 1, m = 3$ )

Thailand: 2( $f = 2$ )

India: 2 ( $f = 1, m = 1$ )

Nigeria: 1 ( $m = 1$ )

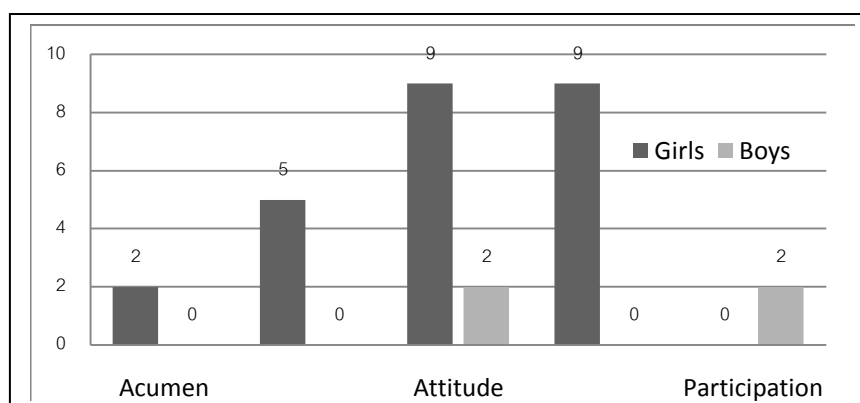
S. Africa: 1( $m = 1$ )

Ireland: 1( $m = 1$ )

- Individual teaching experience varied exponentially, ranging from 2 - 20 years (average: 7.7 yrs.) and encompassed a wide range of institutions and educational settings, such as kindergarten, government schools (elementary and secondary), language centres and higher education.
- All teachers possessed bachelor's degrees from their home countries, and 15 of whom had also acquired a master's degree in an education or teaching related field.

With respect to the teachers' perceptions of English proficiency variations according to gender, 14 respondents perceived girls as higher performers, 2 commented in higher favour of boys, and 4 believed that there was no significant difference between the two genders. When categorising the reasons adduced in favour of each gender, girls were viewed as being considerably more attentive and motivated (see Figure 1). No respondents attributed *motivation* or *attentiveness* to male students, but rather, some teachers advocated in favour of the boys' in-class participation, stating that the latter were more positive contributors to class tasks and activities.

**Figure 1:** Teachers' rationale accounting for proficiency variations



The second research question was to examine the English language test scores and analyse the differences in English proficiency according to gender across high school and university students.

**Table 1:** English proficiency variations among high school students

	<b>Group</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>Result</b>
The	Females	78.26	B	11.23	0.382	Not Sig: p <0.05
	(N)	(77%)				
	Males	75.57	B	14.62		

results presented in Table 1 show that at the high school level, that there was no significant difference in English proficiency levels according to gender, despite females achieving narrowly higher scores and performed more consistently; the latter being reflected in the more constant standard deviation.

**Table 2:** English proficiency variations according to year group

<b>Year Group</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>Result</b>
Grade 10	78.6	76.92	0.7485	Not Sig: p <0.05
Grade 11	77.53	69.36	0.2013	Not Sig: p <0.05
Grade 12	78.5	80.2	0.7201	Not Sig: p <0.05

Upon closer inspection, Table 2 confirms that there was no significant difference in English proficiency scores between boys and girls across all year levels; given that the value of p remained above 0.05 on all individual calculations.

The second data set to examine for research question 2 was the English proficiency scores among private university students.

**Table 3:** English proficiency variations among private university students

<b>Group</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>Result</b>
Females	396	57.03	19.45	<0.01	Sig: p <0.05
(N)		(53.64)			
Males	288	48.77	18.45		

The data displayed in Table 3 indicates that at the private university, female students significantly outperformed their male counterparts, as reflected in the minimal value of p (<0.01), also, their average score was classified as a C grade, compared to that of a D grade standard for male students. On a separate note, similar standard deviations were observed among both groups, inferring comparable levels of variance.



**Table 4:** English proficiency variations of private university students according to faculty

<b>Business</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>Result</b>
Females	282	52.64	16.9	0.0007	Sig: p <0.05
Males	96	45.79	17.1		
<b>I.T</b>					
Females	39	49.97	17.89	0.1926	Not Sig: p <0.05
Males	162	46.11	16.24		
<b>Vet Med</b>					
Females	75	77.25	16.03	0.1954	Not Sig: p <0.05
Males	30	72.67	16.95		

*Note: mean scores per faculty; Bus = 51.04%, I.T = 46.86%, Vet = 75.94%*

The data in Table 4 shows that female students outperformed male students across all faculties, however, the difference only reached statistical significance in the faculty of business administration ( $p = 0.0007$ ). A secondary observation is that higher levels of English proficiency are associated with veterinary medicine students, which is more than likely a consequence of the more refined selection process of entrance examinations, and possessing more intense study habits.

The third data set to examine for research question 2 was the English proficiency scores among government university students.

**Table 5:** English proficiency variations among government university students

<b>Group</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>Result</b>
Females	63	84.7	6.23	<0.01	Sig: p <0.05
(N)		(79.7)			
Males	44	77.7	10.08		

Table 5 reveals that in the government university setting, females outclassed their male peers in significant fashion ( $p = <0.01$ ). In addition, more constant SD readings also denote more consistent levels of performance among the female students (6.23 compared to 10.08).

The primary research question raised in this paper pertained to the level of accordance between the teachers' perceptions of the gender variable in Thai students' English proficiency skills and subsequent performances in formal examination results. The teachers largely concurred on the observation that female students in Bangkok are generally higher

achievers in English due to displaying higher levels of motivation and attentiveness. As hypothesised, the data collated from the students' exam results strongly coincided with this common viewpoint, as the results highlighted that girls demonstrated greater proficiency in English across all three sample clusters; reaching statistical significance in both university settings, which represent the vast majority of the sample population.

### **Discussions**

The general observation from the interpretation of data is that the teachers' perceptions were highly congruent with the students' examination results. However, a number of factors merit further discussion to comprehend the interaction of gender in proficiency variations, which include: the different academic behaviours between high school and university students, the nature of the institution, the relative impact of administering university entrance exams, and, the students' academic discipline of choice. To address these matters, each sample cluster will be discussed in further depth for reflective analysis.

### ***Teacher Interviews***

The most prevalent commonality brought to light was that teachers perceived girls to be substantially more motivated and attentive. These views firmly correspond with the literature studied earlier in this paper, namely Dörnyei et al., (2006) from a Hungarian perspective, and Mori & Gobel's (2006) research findings from a Japanese study, who also noted heightened levels of motivation among female students, spurred on by a more profound interest in L2 culture.

One angle of potential criticism of the qualitative aspect of the current study could be directed at that the sample size ( $n = 20$ ), in that it may not have been sufficiently large to truly represent the general viewpoint of all EFL teachers active in Bangkok. Nonetheless, the justification for the size of the sample is partly due to the careful selection of teachers who were in possession of satisfactory academic profiles, possessed solid work experience, and collectively represented a broad demographics accounting for various nationalities. A number of participating teachers were also pursuing research-based MAs, and can also offer a more thorough metacognitive perspective based on theory and practice. This study wished to avoid the inclusion of participants who intend on working for transient periods (known as *tourist teachers*), who inevitably lack the relevant qualifications and experience to offer an insightful perspective.

### ***High school students***

The nature of this sample is rather a typical of most high schools in the region, seeing that tuition fees are rather affordable and accessible to most strata of society, contrary to the majority of competing IEP programs in Bangkok. An additional factor is that of quality control, the admission of students is conditional on meeting the criteria of entrance examinations, which enhances the quality of the program and clarifies that the school's priorities focus on education as opposed to finances. This may also account for the marginal gender-related achievement gap (girls: 78.26%, boys 75.57%; not sig,  $p < 0.05$ ), and, that in the context of a holistic approach to education, Holder's (2005) proposal that English is a gender-neutral language would appear to be valid. However, it would be of interest to see if the gender gap would remain equally as narrow across rival programs (government and private).

### ***Private university students***

This institution generally excludes the sorting procedure of administering entrance examinations, which unavoidably grants low-achieving candidates admission onto most programs at the university on the condition that financial requirements are met; this regrettably dilutes academic standards, as mirrored in the low-scoring levels of English proficiency across business (51.04%) and IT faculties (48.86%). An additional challenge was the difficulty of securing a sample cluster with demographically balanced sub-groups; this may be owed to the cultural labelling of subjects that still prevails in society (Eisenberg, 1996). That said, this sample was relatively sizeable and represented students from several academic backgrounds with diverse learning experiences from various locations across the nation. Given the diversity of the student profiles, findings from this cluster are likely to indicate the nature and the extent of English proficiency variations between both genders in broader terms. Within this parameter, the unbridgeable achievement gap in favour of females (females: 57.03, males: 48.77%; sig  $< 0.05$ ) adds support to Dönyei's (2006) and Mari & Gobels' theory that girls are more highly motivated to learn English, which manifestly reflected in the results.

### ***Government university students***

Despite the policy of entrance examinations, the government university sample population displayed an identical (gender related) achievement gap in English proficiency scores to those observed among students at the private university (females 84.7%, males 77.7%; sig  $p < 0.05$ ). The exception, however, was that the overall quality of English

proficiency was substantially higher (gov't: 79.7% vs. private: 53.64%). The standard of English noted among this sample was akin to that of the veterinary medicine students at the private university, (79.7%; compared to vets: 75.94%), who were also admitted onto their course of study conditional on meeting the academic requirements of entrance examinations. While the entrance examinations process is irrefutably accountable for higher levels of performance, it evidently did not contribute to narrowing the gender gap at this level. Aside from the interplay of motivation-related variables, the findings from Porta Linguarum (2006) positing that females employ more sophisticated study habits would certainly contribute to elucidating the continual disparate levels of performance between genders.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Data findings from three separate samples (N = 863 students) representing a range of age groups, academic interests and linguistic aptitudes determined that female students displayed higher levels of English proficiency than their male peers, which reached statistical significance in both larger clusters. These results have substantiated the academic and local vernacular that females are higher performers in English owing to the interplay of motivational influences that incite higher levels of achievement. Should male students develop greater engrossment in English as a subject, this may *in theory* contribute to minimising the gender gap in English language proficiency.

To investigate the interplay of gender in English language performances in greater depth, three recommendations have been put forth: (1) The scope of research may be widened to encompass high schools throughout the country to ascertain whether the gender gap widens with age or according to socio-demographics, and, whether the school in this study was merely exceptional in nature; (2) Successive research should also be considered at elementary school level in a bid to detect potential early differences in English language skills between boys and girls; (3) Owing to the significant intervention of gender in English proficiency levels, research should also be contemplated in neighbouring countries to establish whether this level of variance in English proficiency is associated with gender in general terms, or, whether this phenomenon intrinsically pertains to Thailand.

## REFERENCES

- Bornstein MH, Haynes OM, Painter KM, Genevro JL, (2000). Child language with mother and with stranger at home and in the laboratory: a methodological study. *J Child Lang.* Jun;27(2) (pp. 407-20).
- De Bie, M.M.W (1987). Classroom interaction, survival or the fittest?. in D. *Womens' Language, Socialization and Self-image*. Dordrecht: Foris Publications.
- Dörnyei, Z., Csizér, K., & Németh, N., (2006). Motivation, language attitudes and globalisation: A Hungarian perspective. *Multilingual Matters*. (P. 205). Clevedon, England.
- Eisenberg, N., Martin, C. L., & Fabes, R. A. (1996). Gender development and gender effects. In D. C. Berliner & R. C. Calfee (Eds.), *Handbook of educational psychology* (pp. 358- 396). New York: Macmillan.
- Holder, M. C. (2005). Fähigkeitskonzept und Leistungsmotivation im Fremdsprachenunterricht (Ability concept and achievement motivation in foreign language teaching).
- Mori, S. & Gobel, P. (2006): Motivation and gender in the Japanese EFL classroom. *System*, 34: 194-210.
- Murray AD, Johnson J, Peters J, (1990). Fine-tuning of utterance length to preverbal infants: effects on later language development. *J Child Lang.* 17(3): 511-25.
- Powell, R.C (1979) Sex differences in language learning: a review of the evidence in Audio, *Visual Language Journal*, 17(1): 19-24.
- Rúa, P. (2006). *PortaLinguarum*. The sex variable in foreign language learning: an integrative approach (pp.99-114). No.5, January 2006.
- Roulstone S, Loader S, Northstone K, (2002). Descriptive data from the Avon longitudinal study of parents and children. *Early Child Development and Care*. 173(3): 259–268.
- Shucard, D.W., Shucard, J.L. and Thomas, D.G (1988). Sex differences in the patterns of scalp-recorded electrophysiological activity in infancy: possible implications for language development.