Article

Global Professional Politeness: Operationalizing Gender-Inclusive Communication in Taiwan's Vocational ESP

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Abstract
In the wake of Taiwan's *Bilingual 2030 Policy* and the amended *Gender Equity Education Act,* English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instructors face a dual mandate: enhancing professional linguistic competence while fostering social awareness. In Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC), however, critical pedagogy is often met with resistance, perceived by vocational students as a Western imposition incongruent with local values of hierarchy *(Li)* and face *(Mianzi).* This study investigates an 18-week gender-inclusive Business English intervention with 38 Applied English majors at a technological university in southern Taiwan. Moving beyond traditional critical frameworks, this study adopts a critical pragmatism model, operationalizing inclusivity as a high-stakes employability skill rather than a purely ideological stance. Using a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, the study found significant gains in critical gender awareness and specific business writing proficiency. Given the single-cohort design and lack of a comparison group, effect sizes are reported as within-cohort estimates. Qualitative analysis identifies personal network pedagogy—specifically the interrogation of family workplace narratives—as the crucial mechanism for overcoming cultural resistance. The findings suggest that when inclusivity is localized and framed as "Global Professional Politeness," it effectively bridges the gap between local values and global business standards, transforming students from passive recipients of ideology into strategic global communicators.

Keywords
critical pragmatism, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), gender-inclusive language, Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC), Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)

Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) education in the Asia-Pacific region is increasingly shaped by global mobility, professional communication demands, and local reform. In Taiwan, this development is influenced by the *Bilingual 2030 blueprint* (Executive Yuan, 2022) and the *Gender Equity Education Act* (2004; amended 2023), both of which foreground inclusive English-mediated communication. Similar bilingual and English-medium initiatives across the region have likewise shaped ESP-oriented teaching and learning in vocational and higher-education contexts (Lei & Hu, 2023).

For instructors, these mandates converge most visibly in Business English instruction, where gender-focused diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives increasingly emphasize

measurable outcomes rather than symbolic activities in global organizations. In this context, inclusion refers primarily to gender inclusion, while recognizing that language practices play a supporting role in fostering broader inclusivity within professional communities. Major organizations such as Google (2024) and TSMC (2024) now implement accountability targets for gender equity in hiring, promotion, and workplace participation, underscoring a shift from aspirational DEI discourse to outcome-oriented practice. At the same time, the landscape remains dynamic. The Pew Research Center (2024) reports slightly declining employee sentiment toward the extensive visibility of DEI initiatives, suggesting that implementation practices—rather than the goals of gender inclusion themselves—continue to evolve.

Challenges persist in East Asian technological universities, where learners often exhibit instrumental motivations tied to credentialing (Chiu, 2024; Radiamoda, 2024), consistent with Gardner's (1985) long-standing socio-educational model of second language (L2) motivation. Moreover, Western critical pedagogy's egalitarian discourse can strain Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) norms centered on *Li* (propriety), *Ren* (benevolence), and *Mianzi* (face), where public confrontation risks face threats and strategic embarrassment in hierarchical settings (Chang & Haugh, 2011; Han, 2022).

To address these tensions, this study adopts critical pragmatism (CP) as an analytical and pedagogical lens. Rather than positioning language instruction as an ideological critique, CP emphasizes learners' strategic capacity to navigate dominant professional discourses while remaining attentive to local cultural expectations. In this study, CP is operationalized through instructional design principles of instrumentality (professional relevance), negotiation (context-sensitive choice), and localization (grounding global norms in local lived experience).

The pedagogical dilemma

Teaching gender-inclusive language is often framed as a simple lexical adjustment (e.g., chairman → chair). In practice, however, adopting such forms in CHC English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms can be more complex (e.g., Zhang et al., 2020). These challenges suggest that the issue is not simply linguistic but also involves navigating sociocultural expectations and professional norms that shape language use (Le, 2024).

These concerns are especially salient in vocational and technological universities, where students are preparing for employment in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) characterized by high power distance (Yao et al., 2021). In such contexts, pedagogies influenced by Western critical pedagogy—particularly those emphasizing the explicit questioning of authority (Freire, 1970/2018; hooks, 1994)—may be perceived as face-threatening rather than empowering. Consequently, student silence should not be interpreted as a lack of critical engagement; instead, it often functions as a strategic communicative practice aimed at maintaining relational harmony (Chang & Haugh, 2011).

Research purpose and questions

Utilizing CP as an analytical and pedagogical framework, informed by Delpit's (2006) notion of the "culture of power," this study investigates how learners interpret and negotiate gender-inclusive Business English within an 18-week instructional intervention at a Taiwanese technological university. Grounded in the assumption that access to dominant professional discourse conventions is a prerequisite for meaningful participation, the study examines inclusive language practices in vocational learning contexts shaped by both traditional values and contemporary policy mandates. The study addresses the following research questions:

(a) How do Taiwanese Applied English majors perceive gender-inclusive Business

English when viewed through the lens of traditional cultural values and modern policy expectations?

(b) How do students negotiate tensions between Western inclusive norms and local cultural expectations during classroom simulations and authentic practice?

(c) How does a culturally responsive critical pragmatism approach illuminate the relationship between students' linguistic development and emerging awareness of gender inclusivity?

Literature Review

The evolution of ESP: From function to ideology

Early ESP scholarship conceptualized language primarily as a functional resource for professional communication (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). More recent scholarship, however, recognizes professional genres as socially situated practices and emphasizes that needs analysis should address both the functional and social dimensions of workplace communication (Dou, 2024; Hyland, 2022). As gender-inclusive language becomes increasingly prominent across professional and institutional contexts (Lange & von Stockhausen, 2025), the sociopragmatic competence required for Business English communication now encompasses the ability to navigate authority, inclusivity, and professional identity in workplace interactions (Holmes & Riddiford, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011; Mullany, 2022). Consequently, teaching gender-inclusive language is not an ideological imposition but an accurate reflection of Target Language Use (TLU) in contemporary global workplaces (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). Failure to align with these norms may result in communicative penalties in professional contexts, such as signaling exclusion to prospective colleagues and applicants (Gaucher et al., 2011; Stout & Dasgupta, 2011). This strand of research frames gender-inclusive language as a practical ESP concern, establishing the linguistic relevance that motivates the present study's instructional focus.

Cultural friction: Critical pedagogy in Confucian contexts

Despite this shift in global professional norms, pedagogical tensions arise in CHC contexts, where critical pedagogy's emphasis on questioning authority can conflict with values associated with *Wu Lun* (cardinal relationships) (Hofstede, 2001). While overt *Nan Zun Nü Bei* (men honored, women humble) discourse has diminished in Taiwan, structural gender imbalances persist, with women underrepresented in senior decision-making roles (Department of Gender Equality, 2024), and SMEs reinforcing owner-centric hierarchies (Small and Medium Enterprise and Startup Administration, 2023).

The concept of *Mianzi* (face) further complicates the adoption of overtly confrontational pedagogies, as publicly correcting authority figures may threaten relational harmony (Chang & Haugh, 2011). Empirical studies indicate that Chinese speakers resist using singular *they* due to first language (L1) transfer (Zhang et al., 2020) and embedded gender stereotypes in linguistic processing (Li et al., 2022). Resistance in such contexts is therefore typically pragmatic rather than ideological, reflecting learners' strategic evaluation of professional risk. This body of work highlights the pedagogical dilemma the current study addresses: how to teach gender-inclusive language in ways that remain professionally accurate while respecting culturally specific interactional norms.

Theoretical framework: Critical pragmatism

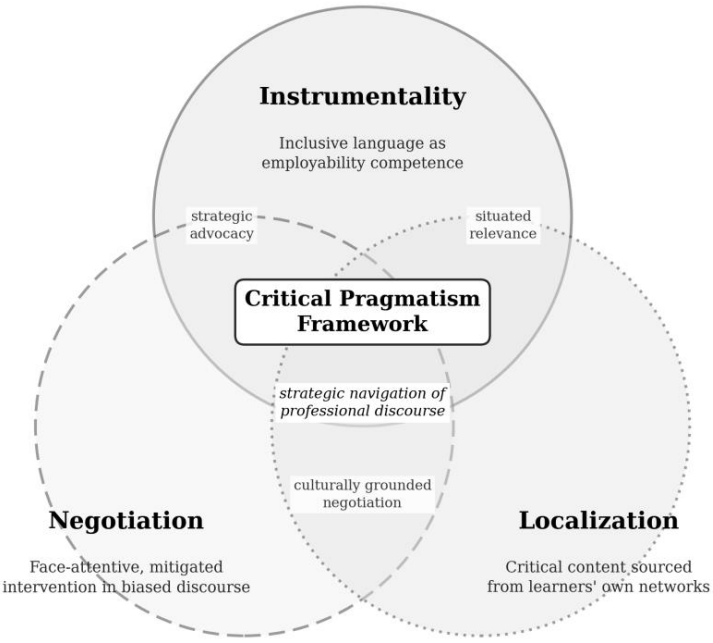
Building on Pennycook (2001) and Benesch (2001), CP reconceptualizes language learning as the strategic integration of communicative effectiveness and critical awareness in situated

professional practice rather than as ideological critique. It comprises three interrelated principles, each transferable beyond the present study.

Instrumentality concerns access to professionally consequential discourse. Drawing on Delpit (2006), it treats mastery of dominant communicative norms as a prerequisite for participation and agency. Inclusive language is thus framed as professional competence. Negotiation concerns context-sensitive intervention. Rather than equating critical action with direct confrontation, it emphasizes strategically calibrated responses, such as hedging, reformulation, and other pragmatic resources that enable influence while maintaining interactional effectiveness (Chang & Haugh, 2011; Yao et al., 2021). Localization concerns grounding critical inquiry in learners' own social networks and experiences. Drawing on funds-of-knowledge perspectives (Moll et al., 1992), it situates critical reflection in learners' lived realities rather than externally imposed agendas.

As illustrated in Figure 1, these principles enable learners to combine communicative competence, strategic agency, and locally grounded critical awareness in professional discourse. In this study, they were operationalized through corpus comparison, safe-fail simulation, and personal-network interviews, extending recent work in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Li, 2024) and transformative learning (Kuriakou, 2023).

Figure 1
The Critical Pragmatism Framework



Note. The three principles are shown as overlapping fields; their intersection defines the competence described. Adapted from Pennycook (2001) and Benesch (2001).

Methodology

Research design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), anchored in a researcher-designed 18-week instructional intervention developed prior to data collection. The intervention comprised three pedagogical phases targeting linguistic awareness, strategic competence, and culturally situated meaning-making. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and integrated during interpretation.

Formal ethical review was waived because the study constituted Scholarship of Teaching and Learning within a regular course and satisfied exemption provisions under Taiwan's *Human Subjects Research Act*. Participation was voluntary and separate from course enrollment. Consent forms were held by an uninvolved colleague until final grades were submitted, and all data were de-identified prior to analysis. Focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim in Mandarin. Excerpts selected for publication were translated by the author, with translations prioritizing pragmatic rather than literal equivalence and subsequently verified through member checking.

Research context and participants

The focal course, *International Business Communication in English* (IBCE), is a required second-year, two-credit subject delivered over 18 weeks (36 contact hours) at a private technological university in southern Taiwan. Participants were 38 second-year Applied English majors (76.3% female; *M* age = 20.4), 95% of whom had graduated from vocational high schools specializing in applied English or business. Taiwan's vocational higher education sector emphasizes employment-oriented training (Ministry of Education, 2025), and participants' prior Business English instruction focused on transactional workplace communication and did not explicitly address inclusive professional register within their existing curriculum. A departmental mock TOEIC yielded a mean score of 530 (*SD* = 35.4, range = 480–615), corresponding to approximately CEFR A2+ to B1− (Educational Testing Service, 2025). The participants comprised an entire intact cohort of students. Course participation was mandatory, whereas research participation was voluntary and based on written consent.

Instructional intervention: Eighteen weeks

The curriculum design was explicitly derived from the study's overarching theoretical framework of critical pragmatism, which selectively draws on insights from critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2018), critical applied linguistics scholarship (Benesch, 2001; Pennycook, 2001), and culturally responsive approaches to learning (Moll et al., 1992). Rather than adopting critical pedagogy's confrontational stance wholesale, the intervention adapts its problem-posing orientation through a CP lens that emphasizes strategic engagement with power-laden discourse.

In this design, language is conceptualized as socially embedded and professionally consequential, informing a staged pedagogy that progresses from critical awareness (Phase I), to agentive yet culturally negotiable action (Phase II), and finally to locally grounded meaning-making (Phase III). Sociocultural constructs such as *Mianzi* (face), funds of knowledge, and situated practice guided the selection of learning activities to ensure that engagement with gender-inclusive language emerged through culturally responsive practices rather than ideological imposition.

To operationalize these commitments, the 18-week intervention was structured into three sequential pedagogical phases—Deconstruction, Negotiated Praxis, and Authentic Reconstruction—each corresponding to a distinct form of learner resistance and a context-sensitive pedagogical response informed by CP.

Phase I: Deconstruction (Weeks 1–6) – Linguistic awareness.

This initial phase focused on making invisible bias visible through data rather than ideology. The core instructional activity involved a corpus-informed comparison. Students analyzed recent annual and sustainability reports produced by Fortune 500 companies (e.g., Apple and

Google) alongside a limited set of English-language texts associated with Taiwanese small- and medium-sized enterprises, including government-mediated SME reports and export-oriented company disclosures. Using basic concordance software (AntConc; Anthony, 2022), students examined collocations involving gender-marked terms (e.g., chairman, spokesman) and patterns of pronoun usage. The analysis revealed that multinational corporations consistently employed gender-inclusive forms such as chair and spokesperson (approximately 85% of instances), whereas English-language materials from local SMEs were sparse and less standardized, reflecting limited international exposure and the absence of formal reporting requirements. This contrast reframed inclusive language not as a political preference but as an emerging global business norm, thereby highlighting a communicative gap vocational graduates must navigate. Pedagogically, this phase shifted student perceptions by appealing to instrumental motivation. As one student reflected, "I always thought *they* as singular was wrong. But when I saw Apple and Microsoft use it constantly, I realized I was learning old English."

Phase II: Negotiated Praxis (Weeks 7–12) – Strategic competence and Mianzi (face).
The second phase emphasized the development of strategies for advocating inclusivity without violating cultural norms related to *Mianzi* (face). Instruction centered on safe-fail simulations designed to mirror authentic workplace situations. Students participated in scaffolded role-plays built around scripted "critical incidents," such as a client assuming a female manager was a secretary or a senior manager interrupting a colleague. Assessment criteria prioritized face-saving strategies, including the use of hedging ("Perhaps we could consider…"), indirect speech acts ("I wonder if it might be more professional to…"), and polite requests that corrected bias without publicly embarrassing the interlocutor. This phase directly addressed tensions between critical pedagogy and Confucian hierarchical norms. Feedback from industry practitioners who reviewed the student scripts confirmed that the simulations reflected authentic workplace dynamics, particularly those requiring junior employees to navigate power asymmetries with high sociolinguistic sensitivity.

Phase III: Authentic Reconstruction (Weeks 13–18) – Personal network pedagogy.
The final phase repositioned learning by grounding global principles in students' local lived experiences. Drawing on the concept of "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992), students conducted personal-network interviews with a family member or acquaintance, regardless of gender, focusing on workplace experiences related to gender dynamics. This approach enabled students to contrast the lived experiences of female relatives—often emphasizing barriers—with the perceptions or blind spots of male relatives. Using interview transcripts as source material, students produced original business correspondence or dialogue scripts that addressed locally situated concerns using standard Business English. Pedagogically, this phase proved transformative by validating theoretical claims through Taiwanese data points. One student noted:

> *I interviewed my mother, who works in a bank. She told me she missed a promotion because the manager said the role required yang qi (masculine energy). I was so angry. I wasn't just doing homework—I was writing what I wished someone had said to my mother's boss.*

Data collection instruments
The data collection instruments were designed to address the study's research questions, with the quantitative strand focusing on changes in business communication proficiency and gender awareness (RQ1 and RQ3), and the qualitative strand examining how students negotiated

cultural norms and inclusive practices during the intervention (RQ1 and RQ2). The complete instruments are reproduced in Appendices A–F.

Quantitative strand

Three quantitative instruments were used to examine whether and to what extent the instructional intervention led to measurable changes in students' business communication competence and gender awareness (RQ1 and RQ3).

(a) Business English communication assessment (BECA): A researcher-developed pretest/posttest (α = .89; see Appendix A) assessed proficiency across four domains: written correspondence, business etiquette, cross-cultural knowledge, and strategic communication. To ensure construct validity and minimize the interference of reading comprehension with pragmatic judgment, scenarios for the etiquette, cultural, and strategic sections were presented bilingually (English/Chinese). However, the Written Correspondence domain required responses exclusively in English to assess productive proficiency. A specific subsection on "Inclusive Editing" required students to identify and rewrite biased English text embedded in authentic workplace scenarios (e.g., memos, emails). Content validity was established by a panel comprising one experienced ESP faculty member and one industry practitioner (a senior HR manager). This combination ensured the instrument was both pedagogically appropriate for vocational learners and aligned with current corporate recruitment standards.

(b) Gender awareness inventory (GAI): This 25-item inventory, rated on a 5-point Likert scale, measured attitudes toward workplace gender equality, inclusive language, and gender role flexibility. The 25 items were distributed across these three dimensions, with four items reverse-scored to reduce acquiescence bias. Item content was informed by themes in the gender and English language teaching (ELT) literature (Huang, 2022; Tarrayo et al., 2021), and the full instrument was presented bilingually. This ensured that valid attitudinal data were collected unencumbered by language proficiency barriers. The instrument demonstrated excellent reliability (α = .92; see Appendix B).

(c) Creative role-play performance assessment: Group simulations were evaluated using an analytic rubric assessing clarity, gender-sensitive language use, strategic hedging, and overall communicative effectiveness. The rubric (see Appendix C), validated by industry practitioners to ensure workplace realism, achieved strong inter-rater reliability (κ = .84) between the researcher and an independent rater.

Qualitative strand

Three qualitative data sources were used to address how students experienced, resisted, and negotiated gender-inclusive language practices within their cultural and workplace contexts (RQ1 and RQ2).

(a) Reflection journals: Students submitted three structured reflections (Weeks 5, 9, 15) and one summative report (Week 18). Students could write in English or Mandarin; each entry was 400–1,000 words in English or 600–1,500 characters in Mandarin. All 38 students wrote in Mandarin. Entries responded to prompts designed to elicit "thick description" of their comfort levels, perceived cultural tensions, and evolving professional identities (see Appendix D).

(b) Semi-structured focus group interviews: Eight students participated in a two-hour post-intervention focus group conducted in Mandarin. Purposive sampling sought variation in baseline GAI scores (low, middle, and high tertiles), gender balance (four men, four women), and completion of all three reflection journals. Male

students were intentionally overrepresented to capture resistance patterns relevant to RQ2. Participation was voluntary and independent of assessment. The interview guide is provided in Appendix E.

(c) Classroom observations: A trained research assistant observed weekly sessions using a structured protocol (see Appendix F) covering participation patterns, gendered dynamics, and instances of spontaneous negotiated praxis. The protocol in Appendix F is translated from the original Chinese version. Observations were recorded as descriptive field notes with verbatim capture of target utterances.

Data analysis

Quantitative analysis

Quantitative analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 28.0 (IBM Corp., 2021). Paired-samples *t* tests examined pretest–posttest changes in communication proficiency and gender awareness. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's *d* and interpreted according to Cohen (1988). Gender differences in GAI scores were explored using a 2 (time: pretest, posttest) × 2 (gender: male, female) mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA), with partial eta squared (η_p^2) reported as the effect size. Follow-up independent-samples *t* tests compared male and female students at pretest and posttest. Because the male subsample was small (n = 9), gender-related findings were interpreted as exploratory. Descriptive statistics were calculated for the creative role-play performance assessment, and Pearson product-moment correlations were used to examine relationships among role-play performance, communication gains, and gender awareness.

Qualitative analysis

Qualitative data from journals, focus groups, and observations were imported into NVivo 14 (Lumivero, 2023). Journal and focus group data were collected and analyzed in Mandarin to preserve participants' intended meanings and contextual nuance. Classroom observation field notes recorded target utterances verbatim in the language used. Coding and theme development were conducted in the original language, and only the excerpts selected for publication were translated into English. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. An inductive approach was utilized to identify emergent patterns specifically connected to the three pillars of critical pragmatism (Instrumentality, Negotiation, Localization). To ensure rigor, 20% of the data was double-coded by an external ESP colleague, yielding strong inter-coder reliability (κ = .81). Trustworthiness was further established through member checking (participants validated key themes) and peer debriefing. Observational field notes were coded within the same framework and used to triangulate self-reported perceptions with classroom behavior. Thematic analysis yielded six themes, summarized in Table 2 with descriptions, illustrative extracts, and links to the CP framework.

Integration

Adhering to the convergent parallel design, quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during the interpretation phase. Side-by-side comparisons and joint display matrices were utilized to highlight convergent and divergent evidence, providing a holistic understanding of how students negotiated the intersection of linguistic proficiency and cultural values across the study's research questions.

Results

RQ1: Student perceptions of gender-inclusive Business English

Quantitative findings

The GAI revealed significant gains across all dimensions (see Table 1). Overall awareness increased from M = 3.20 (SD = 0.60) at pretest to M = 4.30 (SD = 0.50) at posttest, $t(37) = -12.67$, $p < .001$, d = 2.05. Substantial improvements were also observed in workplace gender equality (d = 1.68), gender-inclusive language (d = 1.60), and gender role flexibility (d = 1.45).

Gender differences in GAI scores were also examined. At pretest, female students reported higher awareness (M = 3.40) than male students (M = 2.80), $t(36) = -2.21$, $p = .033$. A significant main effect of time emerged, $F(1, 36) = 48.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .573$. A significant main effect of gender, $F(1, 36) = 4.32$, $p = .045$, $\eta_p{}^2 = .107$, and a significant Time × Gender interaction, $F(1, 36) = 5.14$, $p = .029$, $\eta_p^2 = .125$, were also found. Male students showed larger gains (ΔM = 1.30) than female students (ΔM = 0.90). By posttest, the gender difference was no longer significant, $t(36) = -0.81$, $p = .422$.

Given the small male subsample (n = 9), these findings should be interpreted cautiously. Nevertheless, the reduction in the initial gender gap suggests that the intervention may have been particularly accessible to students who entered the course with lower levels of gender awareness.

Table 1
Pretest and Posttest Results for the Gender Awareness Inventory

Dimension	**Pre *M (SD)***	**Post *M (SD)***	***t***	***p***	**Cohen's *d***
Overall awareness	3.2 (0.6)	4.3 (0.5)	−12.67	< .001	2.05
Workplace equality	3.0 (0.7)	4.1 (0.6)	−10.34	< .001	1.68
Inclusive language	3.4 (0.8)	4.5 (0.6)	−9.87	< .001	1.60
Role flexibility	3.1 (0.9)	4.2 (0.7)	−8.92	< .001	1.45

Note. N = 38. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; d = Cohen's d. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), with reverse-scored items recoded before analysis. All comparisons were conducted using paired-samples t tests. Following Cohen (1988), effect sizes of 0.20, 0.50, and 0.80 represent small, medium, and large effects, respectively.

Qualitative findings

Thematic analysis identified six themes (Table 2). Three themes were particularly relevant to students' perceptions of gender-inclusive Business English: Cultural Resistance ("Western" Imposition), Instrumental Reframing (Professional Gatekeeping), and Representational Validation. Together, these themes illustrate a shift from initial skepticism toward a more professionally oriented understanding of gender-inclusive language.

(a) Cultural Resistance ("Western" Imposition)

Early reflections during Phase I were characterized by skepticism. Students frequently categorized inclusive language as unnatural or politically performative. One male student's Week 3 entry captured the tension between Western critical norms and local hierarchical values:

> *Our textbook says he is generic. Changing it to they feels like we are trying too hard to be politically correct. In Taiwan, we respect the boss. If the boss is a man, we say he. Why change it?*

These responses indicate that initial corpus evidence alone did not immediately override culturally embedded linguistic intuitions.

(b) Instrumental Reframing (Professional Gatekeeping)

As corpus-informed comparisons continued across Phase II, students increasingly reframed gender-inclusive language through a professional rather than ideological lens. Repeated exposure to multinational corporate texts—particularly the observation that approximately 85% of Fortune 500 reports sampled for classroom analysis in the instructional corpus employed gender-neutral references—prompted a pragmatic reassessment of linguistic norms. By mid-semester, reflective discourse had shifted from concerns about "political correctness" to employability and professional legitimacy, as illustrated in a Week 9 reflection:

> *I noticed that the English job ads for project managers at Google Taiwan and TSMC never specify gender. They use the candidate. If I write he in my cover letter, I might look unprofessional. It's not about politics; it's about looking like I belong in a global company.*

These reflections indicate a shift from ideological resistance toward a more instrumental understanding of gender-inclusive language as a professional resource.

(c) Representational Validation

A third theme emerged primarily among female students, who reported feeling represented in professional examples and workplace scenarios for the first time. Exposure to inclusive professional discourse appeared to influence perceptions of future career possibilities and professional identity. As one participant explained: "Finally, I see myself in the examples. For three years of English study, all the managers in our textbooks were men. I feel like this course is saying I can be that person too." This theme suggests that inclusive materials influenced not only language awareness but also students' developing professional self-concepts.

Table 2

Themes Identified Through Thematic Analysis

Theme	**Summary**	**Illustrative Extract**	**CP Dimension**
1. Cultural Resistance ("Western" Imposition)	Gender-inclusive language was perceived as incompatible with local hierarchical norms and expectations regarding status.	"It feels safer to just say *he*. If I use *they* for a manager, I'm afraid he will think I don't know his status." *(FG-M03)*	Negotiation (baseline)
2. Instrumental Reframing (Professional Gatekeeping)	Inclusive language was increasingly viewed as a professional requirement rather than an ideological position.	"It's a skill, like using Word." *(RJ-W9-11)*	Instrumentality
3. Contextualization Through Local Narratives	Family-network interviews made gender issues locally meaningful and personally relevant.	"It stopped being 'Western' and became about respecting my aunt." *(RJ-W15-07)*	Localization
4. Strategic Code-Switching	Students adopted inclusive language in professional contexts while retaining traditional practices in private settings.	"In international business, I will use this language. But with my Taiwanese friends, I still speak normally." *(FG-F05)*	Negotiation (outcome)

5. Representational Validation	Exposure to inclusive professional models strengthened professional self-concept.	"I feel like this course is saying I can be that person too." *(SR-F08)*	Localization
6. Metapragmatic Awareness	Students became more attentive to audience, status, and interpersonal effects of language.	"I think more before I speak or write." *(SR-M01)*	Instrumentality

Note. Themes were derived from reflection journals, focus group interviews, and classroom observation field notes following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Twenty percent of the corpus was independently coded (κ = .81). Extracts originally produced in Mandarin were translated by the author and verified through member checking. M = male; F = female; W = week; FG = focus group; RJ = reflection journal; SR = summative report.

RQ2: Negotiating cultural tensions in practice

Qualitative findings

Building on the perceptual shifts identified under RQ1, thematic analysis highlighted two themes that illuminate how students negotiated tensions between global inclusive norms and local cultural expectations: Contextualization Through Local Narratives and Strategic Code-Switching (Table 2).

(a) Contextualization Through Local Narratives

The most profound transformation occurred during the personal network pedagogy phase. By interviewing family members or acquaintances (regardless of gender), students accessed "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992), drawing on locally situated experiences to make the abstract concept of gender equity concrete and localized. For students who interviewed female relatives, this process often triggered a shift from skepticism to empathy. One male student, initially dismissive of the curriculum, reflected:

> *I interviewed my aunt, who works in a logistics company. She told me she is often cut off in meetings by male supervisors... I realized the role-plays we did in class were actually true. It stopped being "Western" and became about respecting my aunt.*

Conversely, interviews with male relatives often revealed a different, yet equally instructive, dynamic. Students frequently encountered a "gender blindness" that contrasted sharply with the course data, forcing them to critically analyze the silence. As another student noted: "My uncle said his company has no gender issues, but when I asked how many female managers they have, he couldn't name one. That silence was my data." This process of contextualization, made possible by the earlier curricular adjustment, was critical. Whether through the confirmation of grievances or the exposure of blind spots, sourcing content from students' own families dismantled the "foreign import" perception. Gender bias was reframed not as a Western concern imposed by an instructor, but as a Taiwanese reality documented by Taiwanese voices.

(b) Strategic Code-Switching

Rather than wholehearted ideological transformation, most students demonstrated what can be described as strategic acceptance—the ability to deploy gender-inclusive practices in professional contexts while maintaining personal reservations or traditional norms in private settings. As one student concluded: "In English class and in international business, I will use this language. But with my Taiwanese friends, I still speak normally." This pattern illustrates

strategic code-switching and highlights both the utility and the limits of a CP-informed pedagogy in enabling students to navigate multiple discourse communities without requiring total assimilation.

Triangulation from classroom observations

Observational field notes supported the themes identified in journals and focus groups. Students progressed from instructor-prompted to spontaneous intervention in bias-related scenarios, including peer-initiated repairs and unprompted use of inclusive forms. However, little change was observed in voluntary whole-class participation, suggesting growth in context-specific professional competence rather than a broader willingness to speak publicly, consistent with *Mianzi*-related norms (Chang & Haugh, 2011).

Quantitative findings

Role-play performance was evaluated using the 4-point analytic rubric reproduced in Appendix C. Descriptively, mean performance improved from $M = 2.84$ ($SD = 0.42$) during the Phase II simulations to $M = 3.58$ ($SD = 0.36$) during the Phase III simulation, suggesting stronger use of inclusive language, strategic mitigation, and collaborative negotiation strategies over time. Pearson correlation analyses provided convergent validity for these qualitative insights. Role-play performance scores—which measured the ability to negotiate these tensions in real time—were moderately to strongly correlated with gains in written correspondence ($r = .54$, $p < .001$) and gender awareness ($r = .48$, $p < .01$). These correlations demonstrate that the ability to "perform" inclusivity (Strategic Acceptance) was inextricably linked to both linguistic proficiency gains and heightened critical gender awareness—the dual outcomes central to the critical pragmatism framework.

RQ3: Impact on linguistic proficiency and critical awareness

Quantitative findings

Notably, the curricular focus on social topics did not appear to detract from students' language development. This finding contributes to ongoing discussions about the place of gender- and diversity-related content in language education, where educators have reported practical and curricular challenges associated with such integration (Banegas & Govender, 2022; Tarrayo et al., 2021). Despite the cohort's lower-intermediate baseline (TOEIC ~530), the BECA revealed significant improvements across all specific skill domains (see Table 3).

Table 3

Pretest and Posttest Results: Business English Communication Assessment

Dimension	**Pre *M (SD)***	**Post *M (SD)***	***t***	***p***	**Cohen's *d***
Written Correspondence	3.1 (0.8)	4.2 (0.6)	−10.21	< .001	1.37
Business Etiquette	3.3 (0.7)	4.1 (0.7)	−8.45	< .001	1.15
Cross-Cultural Knowledge	3.4 (0.9)	4.2 (0.8)	−7.12	< .001	1.01
Strategic Communication	3.5 (0.8)	4.2 (0.7)	−6.89	< .001	0.95

Note. $N = 38$. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; d = Cohen's d. Domain scores were converted to a common 5-point scale for comparison. All comparisons were conducted using paired-samples t tests. Effect sizes are interpreted following Cohen (1988): 0.20 = small, 0.50 = medium, and 0.80 = large.

Written Correspondence yielded the largest effect size (d = 1.37), followed by Business Etiquette (d = 1.15) and Cross-Cultural Knowledge (d = 1.01). These findings indicate that the strongest changes were observed in domains targeting specific Business English communication skills, including professional email writing and inclusive language use.

Correlational analyses revealed strong positive relationships between gender awareness scores and communicative competence across all domains (r = .58–.72, all p < .001). This strong association suggests that social awareness and linguistic skills are mutually reinforcing rather than competing outcomes: as students became more socially astute, their language use became more precise and professional. However, because these are correlational data from a single cohort, they indicate covariation rather than causation.

Qualitative findings

Evidence from Metapragmatic Awareness (Theme 6) and Instrumental Reframing (Theme 2) similarly supported the quantitative findings, with students reporting greater professional confidence. One student's reflection highlighted how explicit communication "rules" provided a sense of safety:

> *I feel more prepared for international work not just because my English is better, but because I understand the rules that I didn't know existed before. I know how to write emails that won't accidentally offend someone.*

Consistent with Metapragmatic Awareness (Theme 6), students also demonstrated greater sensitivity to how language choices shape interpersonal relationships. One student explained, "Understanding gender issues made me a better communicator overall. Now I'm more aware of how language affects people—not just gender, but also age, status, everything. I think more before I speak or write."

Discussion

Reconciling harmony and equity in CHC contexts

The findings challenge the assumption that Confucian values are inherently antithetical to critical pedagogy. While initial resistance confirmed the literature on *Mianzi* (face) and hierarchy concerns (Chang & Haugh, 2011), the intervention demonstrated that these values can be leveraged rather than opposed.

By framing gender-inclusive language as "Advanced Business Etiquette," the curriculum aligned effectively with the Confucian value of *Li* (propriety). In the modern global context, misgendering a colleague or using exclusionary language constitutes a breach of etiquette that disrupts harmony—particularly in international trade, where such violations can damage corporate reputations. Therefore, adopting inclusive language became a mechanism to maintain face rather than threaten it. This reframing allowed students to bypass the feeling of cultural betrayal. They were not becoming "Westernized rebels" rejecting their heritage; they were becoming sophisticated global communicators adding a new register to their repertoire. As one student articulated: "It's like learning formal versus informal language... Both are real; both are me."

The necessity of personal network pedagogy

A critical contribution of this study is the validation of personal network pedagogy as a mechanism for curriculum localization. Critical pedagogy in Asia is frequently criticized for being a top-down import that imposes Western values (Phan, 2017). This study suggests that

the antidote to this "Western imposition" is to have students source curriculum content themselves.

Traditional ESP relies on Target Situation Analysis (TSA) to define linguistic needs (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998), yet for undergraduates, TSA often remains abstract. By interviewing family members and acquaintances, students grounded global principles in local reality—uncovering both female struggles and male blind spots. This process contextualized the curriculum: gender equity ceased to be a "foreign import" imposed by the instructor and became a Taiwanese reality requiring professional English solutions generated by the students, thereby transforming resistance into ownership.

Implications for the *Bilingual 2030 Policy*

The *Bilingual 2030 Policy* has faced criticism for prioritizing linguistic quantity (a proficiency score) over quality (sociolinguistic competence) (Graham et al., 2021). This study suggests that ESP has a vital role to play in the qualitative dimension of this mandate. If Taiwan aims to become truly bilingual, the English produced by its graduates must be culturally intelligible within global professional discourse. Producing graduates who are fluent yet rely on gender-biased English may hinder effective participation in international supply chains, where corporate communication norms increasingly favor gender-inclusive language. As forward-looking Taiwanese corporations such as TSMC (2024) demonstrate, alignment with international standards increasingly extends to how gender is represented in professional English communication. Graduates entering such environments therefore require linguistic preparation that reflects these communicative expectations, rather than only structural accuracy or surface fluency.

Broader applicability to CHC contexts

While conducted in Taiwan, the findings have broader applicability across Confucian Heritage Cultures. Similar tensions between global gender-inclusive communication norms and local hierarchical expectations have been documented in South Korea, Japan, and Singapore (Phan, 2017). The critical pragmatism framework—with its emphasis on instrumentality, negotiation, and localization—offers a transferable model for ESP educators addressing such tensions across the Asia-Pacific region. This is a claim about the framework's portability rather than an empirical claim about outcomes in those settings, which were not examined in the present study.

A particularly important finding is that this pedagogical approach proved effective for lower-intermediate learners (CEFR A2+/B1−). This finding suggests that the framework is robust across proficiency levels and well suited to vocational contexts, where students typically range from elementary to intermediate proficiency. Notably, substantial gains in written correspondence ($d = 1.37$) were observed despite students' still-developing general proficiency, indicating that explicit attention to gender-inclusive language can provide meaningful scaffolding for broader linguistic development.

Limitations and future directions

This study has several limitations. The single-site design and relatively small sample size ($N = 38$) limit generalizability. Future studies should examine the intervention with larger samples across multiple institutions to test the robustness of the findings. However, the convergent parallel design allows the robust qualitative data to explain the mechanisms behind the quantitative shifts, offering transferability to similar vocational contexts. The gender imbalance (76.3% female) reflects the broader demographics of Applied English programs in Taiwan but warrants caution when interpreting the male subsample findings ($n = 9$), which should be

regarded as preliminary and require confirmation with larger samples. Self-report measures in attitudinal instruments may introduce bias, and future research should incorporate behavioral metrics and longitudinal tracking to examine persistence of change as students enter the workforce. Furthermore, this study focused exclusively on gender. Future iterations of critical pragmatism should expand to address other dimensions of DEI, including disability, age, and socioeconomic status, to provide a more comprehensive preparation for the global workplace.

Implications for theory and practice

The findings suggest several implications for ESP scholarship and practice. First, gender-inclusive communication and language development need not be treated as competing instructional goals. Rather, integrating inclusive language into ESP instruction may support learners' awareness of audience, register, and pragmatic appropriateness while fostering greater sensitivity to workplace diversity.

Second, the findings highlight the importance of localization. Activities connecting course content to students' family and social networks appeared to make gender-related workplace issues more relevant and reduced perceptions of gender-inclusive communication as externally imposed.

Third, the study suggests that critical pragmatism may offer a useful framework for vocational and technological higher education. By presenting inclusive communication as a dimension of professional competence, the approach aligns social awareness objectives with students' career-oriented goals.

Collectively, these findings suggest that student engagement may be enhanced when gender-inclusive language is framed as a professional communicative resource rather than an ideological position. Given that the study involved a single cohort without a comparison group, these implications should be regarded as tentative and warrant further examination across different ESP contexts.

Conclusion

This study suggests that the perceived tension between Confucian heritage values and gender-inclusive ESP is less an inherent incompatibility than a challenge of pedagogical design. By integrating professional relevance, localized reflection, and explicit language instruction, the critical pragmatism framework appeared to support students' engagement with gender-inclusive communication in ways that were both contextually grounded and professionally meaningful. The findings further suggest that communicative competence and social awareness need not be treated as competing objectives within ESP education. Rather, gender-inclusive communication may be incorporated into Business English instruction in culturally responsive ways that support learners' participation in increasingly diverse international workplaces.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used for language editing; the author assumes full responsibility for the manuscript.

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