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### Gendered Voices in Addressing Academic Needs Amongst Foster Children From Multicultural Society

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#### Abstract

Students from foster care are highly known for their poor performance in school and retention in grade. Nevertheless, female students in general achieve better academic results than male students. Studies on gendered differences among foster children seem to be scarce. Therefore, this study examines the use of linguistics features among male and female foster children in expressing their needs to improve their academic performance. For this purpose, semi-structured interview questions are used to gather data from foster children in Malaysia. The narratives elicited from the interviews are qualitatively analysed using content analysis approach. The data reveal that the use of adjectives, direct statements and accusation are common in the responses of both male and female foster children. However, the female foster children are more expressive in their responses as intensifying adverbs were frequently used when highlighting concern on their poor academic performance. Female foster children's willingness to share problems and concern about their academic performance makes it easier for the teachers to assist. The male foster children, in contrast, tend to use denial as a strategy to conceal their problems and avoid displaying any signs of weaknesses. Ultimately, not voicing their problems may result in the lack of awareness amongst teachers and making it challenging for them to attend to the academic needs of these children.

**Keywords:** gendered voices, linguistics features, academic needs, foster children

#### Introduction

Students from foster care, in general, do not excel academically and they are highly known for their poor performance in school, high rates of absenteeism, retention in grade and involvement in special education programs (Leiter & Johnsen, 1997; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004; Zima et al., 2000). Further, majority of foster children also dropped out from school and could not obtain a high school diploma (Blome, 1997; Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; Joiner, 2001). However, there are gender differences in terms of academic achievements.

Studies reveal that statistically, female students achieve better results in public examination and accomplish more school and post-school qualifications than male students (Jabor et al., 2011; Nachiappan et al., 2012). When it comes to language learning, females also generally perform better than males (Sunderland, 2000). When students are given the opportunities to express themselves in a group discussion during class, girls are better at expressing their thoughts and creating a sense of harmony through language (Davies, 2003, p. 128). Boys, on the contrary, have difficulties expressing

themselves as they tend to conform to their macho stereotype and restrict their choices of words to express due to peer pressure (Davies, 2003, p. 129). In addition, boys are often 'egoistic' (Nachiappan et al., 2012, p. 143-146). During learning process, they avoid asking questions, afraid to admit their mistakes and often lack interest in their studies (Nachiappan et al., 2012). Such an egoistic makes it difficult for teachers to recognise the problems male students encounter in school.

Moreover, in the expression of concern, females are more likely to express concern for others than males; whereas, males prefer materialism and competition (Beutal & Marini, 1995). Although Beutal and Marini (1995) examine gender differences on concern, they focus on exploring male and female express concern for the well-being of others instead of self. The language aspect in which concern is voiced has been ignored in their study.

Recent studies focus on exploring teachers' voices of concern on foster children's inadequate provision of food and pocket money (Jariah Mohd. Jan & How, 2015) and caregivers' request in fulfilling the academic needs of foster children in Malaysia (How & Jariah Mohd. Jan, 2016). However, the ways male and female foster children express concern in terms of their academic performance have been disregarded. There is a need for further study to explore the perceptions of male and female students about their classes, teachers and the treatment they receive in school, which might influence their academic achievement (Ghazvini & Khajehpour, 2011). Therefore, this study examines gendered voices amongst foster children in addressing their academic needs. Specifically, it aims to analyse the use of language among male and female foster children in expressing their needs to improve their academic performance.

## **Related Literature about Gendered Differences in Language Use**

There are differences in the use of language between male and female in general. The following subsections discuss male and female speech styles, their use of hedges and adjectives, males' macho characteristics and the ways male and female cope with stress from related studies.

### ***Male and Female Speech Styles***

Female's language is prominent with its softness and excessive politeness (Lakoff, 1975). The features of female's language include specific use of lexical items, such as precise colour terms, affective adjectives and super polite forms (Lakoff, 1975). Female's language features often appear to lack confidence and uncertainty, but this cannot be generalised or referred to all manner (Talbot, 2010, p. 36). They prefer to use hedges, intensifiers, tag questions, emphatic stress, rising intonation and hypercorrect grammar to weaken or strengthen the force of the message delivered (Lakoff, 1975).

Male's features of speech, on the contrary, often include non-standard linguistic forms, expletive words, loud and assertive (Hornoiu, 2002), as well as the use of slang, profanity and obscenity (Haas, 1979). Male speech style includes competitive and goal-oriented (Cameron, 1995). Also, males often use language to argue, command, and lecture (Haas, 1979). Many instances of swearwords are frequently found in males' speech but rarely in females' speech (Katiliute, 2011).

When working on tasks in groups, males prefer to talk to accomplish tasks, address facts and solve problems (Torppa, 2010). Thus, they are good in report talk which portrays the skills of analysing, competitive and aggressiveness on task completion. Females prefer to have the 'rapport talk' to maintain the solidarity relationships, express emotion, empathy, nurture and to show support (Tannen, 1990; Torppa, 2010). Additionally, females prefer to build trust, rapport, express feelings and collaborate with others to accomplish their tasks (Maltz & Borker, 1982, p. 207).

During group discussion, females use cohesive strategies to share meanings and develop ideas (Davies, 2003, p. 118) as well as offer personal details (ibid., p. 121). They tend to be more emotional, tentative, supportive (Haas, 1979) and more expressive than males (Kring & Gordon, 1998; Davies, 2003). Additionally, features such as supportive, conciliatory, co-operative and process-oriented are being

categorised as female speech style. Conversely, males can be co-operative and competitive simultaneously during talk (Cameron, 1997). Males tend to compete with others during discussion by using referential, goal-oriented language, and words which leave impact and effect (ibid.).

Apart from that, there are also differences between male and female speech styles during arguments. In Miller et al.'s (1986) study, girls prefer to employ mitigating strategies such as compromise and evasion; while boys are more likely to use assertive style when arguing in the same-sex group (Miller et al., 1986). However, Ladegaard's (2004) findings contradict with Miller et al.'s (1986) when he found that both boys and girls in his study adopt a direct and unmitigated style during arguments with their peers.

### ***The Use of Adjectives by Male and Female***

Males and females also use adjectives to show approval or admiration for something (Katiliute, 2011). Females frequently use evaluative adjectives such as 'adorable', 'lovely', 'charming', 'sweet' or 'cute' (Kramer, 1977; Lakoff, 1975); whereas males prefer to use adjectives like 'terrific', 'neat' or 'great'. Nevertheless, girls use more adjectives than boys (Brandis & Henderson, 1970; Entwisle & Garvey, 1972), which could show that girls are more expressive than boys.

### ***The Use of Hedges by Male and Female***

Hedges are often found in both males and females' speech styles during conversations (Jariah Mohd. Jan, 2002, p. 150). Males use hedges to keep the floor of the discussion or to strengthen their utterances (Holmes, 1999). Conversely, females adopt hedges to show uncertainty or to avoid making direct statements (Holmes, 1995).

### ***Males' Macho Characteristic***

Many have overlooked the fact that males have problems conforming to a macho characteristic (Nayak & Kehily, 1996). Such a macho characteristic can be seen through their display of toughness, provocation, domination, coolness, interpersonal bragging and fighting skills in school (Adler & Adler, 1998, p. 55). In maintaining their macho character, boys tend to avoid being teased or being excluded from their group of friends during classroom discussion (Nayak & Kehily, 1996). Additionally, they enjoy bragging and being bossy (Goodwin, 1980, p. 169). Although boys try to be macho, they lack ideas and dictions to express (Davies, 2003, p. 124).

### ***Coping with Stress by Male and Female***

When facing problems or challenges, males and females have a different way in coping with stress. Gary's (1992) phrase "Men go to their caves and women talk" denotes that males tend to withdraw themselves from the conversation that causes stress; while females reach out and talk about their problems. However, in general males too want to be appreciated and needed while females strive to feel appreciated and respected (Gary, 1992).

All the above studies show that males and females differ in terms of speech style when coping with stress but not in the ways they voice their concern about their academic performance and needs. In the case of foster children in this study, exploring the voices of concern on academic matters and the challenges that they encounter would provide further insights in the way language is used.

## **Methodology**

This is a qualitative study (Creswell, 2012) which explores gendered voices amongst foster children in addressing their academic needs. The theoretical framework employed in this study is Lakoff's (1975) female language features, which include hedges, intensifiers, tag questions, emphatic stress, rising

intonation, hypercorrect grammar and specific use of lexical items (e.g. precise colour terms, affective adjectives and super polite forms).

### ***Profile of the Participants***

A total of twelve foster children, whose age ranges from 13 to 17, from a selected foster care in Klang Valley area in Malaysia, were interviewed. They attend an urban secondary school near the selected foster home. These foster children comprise of 7 males and 5 females.

Table 1: Profile of Foster Children

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Child</b>	<b>Form / Class</b>	<b>Age</b>
Males	M1	Form 4S	16
	M2	Form 3K	15
	M3	Form 2S	14
	M4	Form 2V	14
	M5	Form 2V	14
	M6	Form 2T	14
	M7	Form 1T	13
Females	F1	Form 5J	17
	F2	Form 4S	16
	F3	Form 4B	16
	F4	Form 2T	14
	F5	Form 1T	13

### ***Ethical Consideration***

Verbal and written consent from the school's principal and foster children were attained prior to the data collection (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The foster children's mid-term examination results were obtained from the school (Table 2) and they are kept confidential and anonymous. For the purpose of analysis, their names are coded (e.g. M1).

Table 2: Foster Children's Overall Academic Performance

<b>No.</b>	<b>Subjects</b>	<b>Overall grades</b>	<b>Range (C-G)</b>	<b>Average percentage</b>
1.	Civics	7C, 1B+, 1B, 1D, 1E, 1G	10/12	51.50%
2.	Art	5D, 2C, 1B+, 1B, 1E	8/10	51.40%
3.	Life skills	4C, 2E, 1B, 1D	7/8	47.25%
4.	Physical and Health	6E, 2C, 2D, 1A-, 1B	10/12	42.92%
5.	Geography	4D, 3E, 1C	8/8	41.13%
6.	History	4E, 3D, 2G, 1A+, 1A, 1C	10/12	40.17%
7.	Islamic Knowledge	7E, 1A-, 1B+, 1C, 1D, 1G	10/12	36.00%
8.	English Language	6E, 2B, 2G, 2D	10/12	27.80%
9.	Mathematics	8E, 3G, 1C	12/12	27.50%
10.	Malay Language	7E, 2G, 1C+, 1C, 1D	12/12	23.08%
11.	Science	7E, 2G, 1B, 1D	10/11	18.00%

According to the Malaysian education grading system, the highest grade foster children in this study could achieve is C (50-59%) as majority of them scored an average of 51.5% in Civics. However, they did poorly in other core subjects. Their average scores for the core subjects Geography (41.13%) and History (40.17%) are under the grade E (40-44%); whereas they failed Islamic knowledge (36%), English language (27.8%), Mathematics (27.5%), Malay language (23.08%) and Science (18%) in which they obtain the grade G (1-39). Such results indicate that they need guidance in terms of their core subjects in order to excel in their academic performance.

**Research Instruments**

Semi-structured interview questions were used to allow the researchers to probe more information from the foster children about their academic performance. An audio recorder (MP3), which was used to record the interviews, allows the researchers to listen to the audio-recording of the interviews repeatedly at any time. The recorded data were transcribed based on an adapted version of Jefferson Transcription Conventions (1984). Since the interviews were conducted in Malay because the foster children were more comfortable being interviewed in Malay language, their responses were then translated into English language for the purpose of analysis.

**Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

Semi-structured interview data were collected over a period of one month. Appointments with the foster children were pre-arranged before the interview sessions. At the interview session, a brief introduction was done and the children were informed about the purpose of the study before the interviews begin. The researchers initiated the interviews with questions regarding the foster children’s profile to build rapport. The interviews then proceeded with the main questions regarding the academic needs of foster children. Follow-up questions were added during the interviews. Content analysis approach served as the research tool to analyse the content of the interview data by identifying foster children’s problems in terms of academic needs.

**Findings and Analysis**

The linguistic features which emerged from the narrations of foster children when voicing their academic needs include adjectives, intensifying adverbs, denial, direct statement, and accusation. Table 3 illustrates the use of adjectives, direct statements, intensifying adverbs and accusation amongst females; while males use all of these features except intensifying adverbs when responding about their poor academic performance.

Table 3: Linguistics Features in Male and Female Foster Children’s Responses about their Poor Academic Performance

Linguistics Features	Female	Frequency	Male	Frequency
<b>The use of adjectives</b> (n=7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>pening</i> (stressful or confusing)</li> <li>• <i>lemahlah</i> (weak)</li> <li>• <i>bodoh</i> (stupid)</li> <li>• <i>malas</i> (lazy)</li> <li>• <i>susah</i> (difficult)</li> </ul>	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>susah sikit</i> (a little bit difficult)</li> <li>• <i>susah</i> (difficult)</li> </ul>	2
<b>The use of intensifying adverbs</b> (n=3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>paling kurang</i> (least)</li> <li>• <i>paling</i> (most)</li> <li>• <i>memang</i> (really)</li> </ul>	3	—	—

<b>Denial</b> (n=2)	–	–	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>ah tu lah</i> (that's it)</li> <li>• <i>tak ada</i> (none)</li> </ul>	2
<b>The use of direct statement</b> (n=2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>saya tak boleh bawa Add Math</i> (I could not cope with Additional Mathematics)</li> </ul>	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>saya gagal PMR</i> (I failed lower secondary examination)</li> </ul>	1
<b>Accusation</b> (n=2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• still <i>lagi tak ada</i> (still don't have)</li> </ul>	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>dia marah</i> (he/she will reprimand us)</li> </ul>	1

As illustrated in Table 3, the use of adjectives has the highest frequency (n=7) and it is prominent in both male and female foster children's responses. The analysis and discussion begin with the use of adjective, followed by intensifying adverbs (n=3), denial (n=2), direct statements (n=2) and accusation (n=2).

### The Use of Adjectives

Both male and female foster children use adjectives to describe their performance in certain subjects. The first example is evident in Excerpt 1 where a female foster child complains about the subjects she is weak in.

#### Excerpt 1

[1]	F2:	<i>Maths / Sains /</i> <i>Mathematics / Science /</i> <i>Mathematics / Science /</i>
[2]		<i>Tak boleh buat / kalau Math tu / nak kena kira</i> Cannot do / if Mathematics / have to count I cannot do it / if it is Mathematics / (I) have to count
[3]		<i>nombor-nombor / pening / lepas tu yang Sains tu nak</i> numbers / headache / and then in Science need numbers / confusing / and then in Science (I) need
[4]		<i>tahu pasal sel / lepas tu /bikar-bikar semua benda tu /</i> to know about cells / and then /beakers all those things / to know about cells / and then /all those beakers /
[5]		ah <i>susah / susah /</i> difficult / difficult / difficult / difficult /

In line 3, the literal translation of adjective *pening* refers to headache as the mental state of the child is described. However, in this context of use, *pening* connotes the meaning of confusing. Such an expression shows that she is concerned about her performance in the subjects she is weak in. Further, F2 repetitively utilises the adjective *susah* (difficult) in line 5 to represent her true explication of concern in being weak in both subjects. In this context, the use of adjectives *pening* (confusing) and *susah* (difficult) suggests that this female foster child is seeking sympathy. At the same time, it implies that she is being direct when describing her inability to do well in both Mathematics and Science subjects.

In Excerpt 2, F4 affirms that she is weak in Mathematics, Malay language and Science subjects.

Excerpt 2

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[1]	F4:	<i>Maths</i>	/	<i>BM</i>	/	<i>Sains</i>	/
		Mathematics	/	Malay language	/	Science	/
		Mathematics	/	Malay language	/	Science	/
[2]		<b><i>Lemahlah</i></b>	<i>semua tu</i>	/			
		Weak particle-lah	in all that	/			
		I am weak	in all those subjects	/			
[3]		<i>Tak</i>	/	<i>buat bodoh je</i>	/		
		Nothing	/	I play dumb only	/		
		Nothing	/	I didn't do anything	/		
[4]		<i>Kita rasa macam malas</i>	<i>nak belajar</i>	/			
		We feel like lazy	to study	/			
		I am lazy	to study	/			
[5]		<b><i>Pening</i></b>	<i>nak fikir tu</i>	/			
		Headache	to think about it	/			
		It is stressful	to think about	/			

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As shown in line 2, F4 employs the adjective *lemahlah* (weak) to describe her poor performance in the subjects she mentioned in line 1. In line 3, the adjective *bodoh* (dumb) in this context of use connotes F4's unwillingness to make any effort to improve her weak subjects. In this instance, it can be argued that her weak performance in these subjects is the reason that demotivates her from studying. Her lack of motivation is also evident in the use of adjective *malas* (lazy) in line 4 where F4 describes the consequence of not being able to perform well in the subjects she is weak in.

Besides, during the interview, F4 admits of having more interest in watching television than studying.

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F4:	<i>tak suka belajar sangat</i>	/	<i>suka tengok TV</i>	/
	I don't really like to study	/	I like to watch TV	/

---

This response indicates that 'immaturity' and 'easily influenced by activities which are non-beneficial' for their studies are factors that affect the academic performance of female students (Nachiappan et al., 2012, p. 143).

Furthermore, what is communicated in the adjective *pening* (headache) in Excerpt 2 is not the same as found in Excerpt 1. In this context, the adjective *pening* (line 5) is used to describe that it is stressful for her to think of a way to improve the subjects she is weak in. This excerpt implies that F4 is willing to open up by using adjectives to describe her problems despite her lack of interest in studying.

Male foster children also employ adjectives when responding about the subject they are weak in. However, they describe their academic performance differently compared to the female foster children. As evident in Excerpt 3, M7 uses adjective to describe the subject that he could not excel.

Excerpt 3

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[1]	M7:	hmm:::	<i>macam Math lah</i>	/	<i>Math susah sikit</i>	/
			like Mathematics	/	Mathematics is difficult a bit	/
			like Mathematics	/	Mathematics is a bit difficult	/

---

The adjective *susah sikit* (a bit difficult) in line 1 does not affirm whether M7 is really weak in Mathematics. It could also be implied that the child, although finds the subject a little difficult, is still

able to perform well. In this instance, it appears that M7 does not want to admit that he is weak in Mathematics and at the same time being indirect because his response is vague.

Additionally, the adjective *susah* (difficult) is also employed by M6 in Excerpt 4 (line 2), another male foster child, when he complains that Mathematics and English subjects are challenging.

#### Excerpt 4

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[1]	M6:	<i>Maths</i> / <i>BI</i> / Mathematics / English / Mathematics / English /
[2]		<i>sebab Math nak kira susah</i> / because Maths need to count difficult / because Maths is difficult to count /
[3]		<i>cikgu bagi dah</i> / <i>tak faham juga</i> / the teacher has given / still could not understand / the teacher has helped / (I) still could not understand /
[4]		<i>macam kuasa dua</i> / <i>seratus kuasa dua ah</i> / like power of two / a hundred power of two / like to the power of two / a hundred to the power of two /

---

However, unlike M7, M6 illustrates the problems he faced, such as the challenge in calculating square root (line 4). He further expresses his concern when he reveals that despite receiving guidance from the school teacher, he is still having trouble comprehending square root, as evident in line 3 in the utterance *tak faham juga* (I still could not understand).

As far as the features are concerned, the male and female foster children in this study have the tendency to use adjectives to describe the problems they encounter and express concern in the subjects they could not excel. Although the use of adjectives is common in both genders, male foster children tend to limit their use to the adjective *susah* (difficult); in contrast, the female foster children use various types of adjective, namely *pening* (stressful or confusing), *lemahlah* (weak), *bodoh* (stupid), *malas* (lazy) and *susah* (difficult). These features show the differences between male and female foster children in expressing concern even though they are addressing the same issue (i.e. poor academic performance). Such a finding suggests that females are willing to share by using various types of adjectives to describe their problems; whereas, the males use limited adjectives when describing (Davis, 2003).

### **The Use of Intensifying Adverbs**

Intensifying adverb is a feature which has emerged only in the female foster children's responses in this study. Intensifying adverb is used to reinforce the adjective or strengthen the illocutionary force of their assertion about their weak performance in certain subjects. In Excerpt 5, F1 complains about her weakest subject and reveals that it is Mathematics.

#### Excerpt 5

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[1]	F1:	<i>Subjek er kurang paling kurang mahir saya Maths</i> / Subject less most less skilled my Mathematics / The subject that I am the least skilled in is Mathematics /
[2]		<i>saya memang tak pandai er</i> / <i>saya pandai mengira</i> / I really not clever / I clever counting / I am really not skilled / I am good at counting /
[3]		<i>tapi saya tak boleh tengok nombor</i> / <i>saya memang lemah</i> but I could not look numbers / I really weak but I could not look at numbers / I am really weak

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[4]	<i>dalam bab-bab nombor ni tapi saya kuat menghafal</i> / in chapters on numbers but I am strong in memorising / in the chapters on numbers but I am good at memorising /
[5]	<i>lepas tu er Maths saya selalu gagal dan saya dah cuba</i> after that my Mathematics always fail and I have tried after that I always fail in Mathematics and I have tried
[6]	<i>macam-macam cara tapi tak boleh</i> / all kinds of methods but couldn't / all kinds of methods but I still couldn't (excel) /

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In lines 1, 2 and 3, F1 employs the intensifying adverbs *paling kurang* (least) and *memang* (really) in the expressions of *paling kurang mahir* (least skilled), *memang tak pandai* (really not skilled) and *memang lemah* (really weak) to intensify her concern in which she performs poorly in Mathematics. In this instance, the child is being direct in expressing her concern.

In the following excerpt, F5 complains about not being able to excel in Mathematics, Science and English.

#### Excerpt 6

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[1]	F5: <i>Math paling lemah</i> / Maths is the most weak / Mathematics is my weakest (subject) /
[2]	<i>Math dengan Sains</i> / Maths with Science / Maths and Science /
[3]	<i>hmm sebab tak tahu</i> / <i>Sains dengan BI</i> / hmm because don't know / Science with English / because I don't know / Science and English /

---

In line 1, the intensifying adverb *paling* (most) acts as a boosting device to strengthen the force of the message or to emphasise that Mathematics is F5's weakest subject. The use of intensifier shows that F5 explicitly expresses concern about her poor performance in Mathematics.

### **The Use of Direct Statements**

Direct statements are used by one male and one female foster child to reveal their lack of comprehension in certain subjects they are weak in. In the following, two instances of direct statements are discussed. In Excerpt 7, F3 complains about the problem she faces in understanding Additional Mathematics.

#### Excerpt 7

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[1]	F3: <i>Saya tak boleh bawa Add Math dan saya kalau saya</i> I cannot take Additional Mathematics and I if I I cannot cope with Additional Mathematics and even if I
[2]	<i>belajar pun saya takkan belajar</i> / <i>saya tengok je</i> study also I will not study / I look only tried I will not study / I will only look at
[3]	<i>Add Math tu</i> / <i>kadang-kadang tidur dalam</i> the Additional Mathematics / sometimes sleep in Additional Mathematics / sometimes I sleep in
[4]	<i>kelas sebab tak ada</i> / <i>saya tak faham dan saya dah</i> class because no / I do not understand and I have class because there is no / I do not understand and many
[5]	<i>minta banyak kali nak orang nak ajar sebab memang</i>

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	asked many times want one want teach because really times I have requested for someone to teach me because
[6]	<i>kalau saya tak faham / saya takkan suka subjek itu /</i> if I do not understand / I will not like the subject / really if I do not understand / I will not like the subject /
[7]	<i>bila saya faham subjek tu / baru saya akan suka /</i> when I understand the subject / only I will like / when I understand the subject / only then will I like it /
[8]	<i>bila tak faham / nak faham juga /</i> when don't understand / want to understand also / when (I) don't understand / I try to understand /
[9]	<i>saya paksa diri saya faham juga / tapi memang saya</i> I force myself understand too / but really I I still force myself to understand / but I really
[10]	<i>tak dapat faham / bila saya tak dapat faham /</i> cannot understand / when I cannot understand / cannot understand / when I cannot understand /
[11]	<i>saya takkan belajar /</i> I will not study / I will not study /

---

F3 willingly expresses her struggles in academic using the expressions *saya tak boleh bawa Add Math* (I cannot cope with Additional Mathematics) and *saya tak faham* (I do not understand) in lines 1 and 4 to denote that she is unable to excel in this subject. The utterances *saya takkan belajar* (I will not study), *tidur* (sleep) and *saya takkan suka subjek tu* (I will not like the subject) in lines 2, 3 and 6 suggest the consequences of her poor performance in Additional Mathematics.

Additionally, F3 further describes the struggles she faces when she mentions the difficulty in obtaining a tutor to guide her in this subject, as evident in lines 4 and 5 in the utterance *saya dah minta banyak kali nak orang nak ajar* (many times I have requested for someone to teach me). She employs the expression *banyak kali* (many times) (line 5) to highlight her constant effort in requesting for a private tutor. Such an expression also stipulates her desperate need of an Additional Mathematics tutor. F3 further highlights that she has tried her best to learn the subject when she utters *saya paksa diri saya faham juga* (I still force myself to understand) in line 9. The phrase *paksa diri* (force myself) (line 9) connotes her desperation to improve the subject she is weak in; and it appears that she is concurrently seeking sympathy from the interviewer. In this instance, not only is she being direct as well as personal, she uses a wide range of lexical choices to narrate her problems and needs.

In Excerpt 8, M1, a male foster child, directly reveals that he could not perform well in all the subjects and does not put the blame on anyone for his academic underachievement. The responses *semualah* (all) and *saya gagal PMR* (I failed lower secondary examination) in lines 1 and 2 are M1's direct responses telling the interviewer that he is academically hopeless.

#### Excerpt 8

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[1]	M1: Oh <i>ada</i> / <b><i>semualah</i></b> / Oh got / all / Oh I have / all of them /
[2]	<b><i>Saya gagal</i></b> er <b><i>PMR</i></b> / I failed lower secondary examination / I failed my lower secondary examination /
[3]	<b><i>Saya pun tak tahu</i></b> / I also don't know / I also don't know /

---

In line 3, the utterance *saya pun tak tahu* (I also don't know) implies that M1 is ignorant of the actual reason underlying his underachievement and this is his primary concern.

### **Denial**

Denial is one of the linguistics features used only by the male foster children in this study when responding to questions about their academic performance. As evident in Excerpt 9, M5 does not provide any further explanation about the problems he faces in Mathematics and Science. Instead, he only provides a short answer.

#### Excerpt 9

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[1]	M5:	<i>Math dengan Sains / Math / Sains / ah tu lah /</i>
		<i>Maths and Science / Maths / Science / that's it particle-lah /</i>
		<i>Maths and Science / Maths / Science / that's it /</i>

---

The response *ah tu lah* (that's it) in line 1 indicates that he is only weak in Mathematics and Science and not the other subjects, which denotes that he is unwilling to reveal his problems.

In Excerpts 10 and 11, both M3 and M4 provide a different response from the other foster children when they refuse to reveal the subjects they are weak in. It can be argued that their short and concise answers *tak ada* (none) could deter the interviewer from asking any follow-up questions.

#### Excerpt 10

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[1]	M3:	<b><i>Tak ada /</i></b>
		<i>None /</i>
		<i>None /</i>

---

#### Excerpt 11

---

[1]	M4:	<b><i>Tak ada /</i></b>
		<i>None /</i>
		<i>None /</i>

---

Yet, based on their recent mid-term examination results, both of them did not excel. M3 achieved 10Es and 1D; whereas, M4 achieved 8Es, 2Ds, and 1C. This could denote that they deny having poor academic results as they might want to avoid being labelled as weak students. This should be a major concern for the teachers.

In sum, three of the male foster children deny having more than two weak subjects or being weak in any subject. This suggests that males avoid showing signs of weaknesses (Kring & Gordon, 1998).

### **Accusation**

In this study, one male and one female foster child accuse the others for their poor academic performance.

#### Excerpt 12

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[1]	M2:	<i>Geo /</i>
		<i>Geography /</i>
		<i>Geography /</i>

---

- 
- [2] *PT3 tu susah / sebab benda baru apa ni /*  
 PT3 is difficult / because the new thing what /  
 PT3 is difficult / because when a new topic is /
- [3] *memperkenalkan sehari / esok tu kita tak tahu*  
 introduced a day / tomorrow we do not know  
 was introduced in a day / and if we don't know
- [4] *benda / kita kena marah / dia dalam dua hari /*  
 the thing / we will be angry / it in two days /  
 it by tomorrow / we will be reprimanded / in two days /
- [5] *mana nak tahu cara dia punya format dia kan? / lepas tu*  
 how to know the way the format right? / after that  
 how could we possibly understand the format right? / if
- [6] *dia tanya tak tahu / dia marah /*  
 he/she asks don't know / he/she is upset /  
 he/she asks and (we) don't know / he/she will reprimand us) /
- [7] *Cikgulah / kadang-kadang kalau benda*  
 Teacher particle-lah / sometimes if the thing that  
 The teacher / sometimes if (I) ask the
- [8] *yang tanya banyak kali / dia marah /*  
 has been asked many times / he/she is upset /  
 same thing too often / he/she will reprimand (us) /
- 

The adjective *susah* (difficult) is once again evident in a male foster child's response in line 2 when M2 states that his weakest subject is Geography. Unlike the other male foster children, M2 shifts the blame to the school teacher when he constantly complains that the Geography teacher gets easily upset whenever he makes a second attempt to enquire about his lack of understanding towards the subject, as evident in the utterances *kita kena marah* (we will be reprimanded) and *dia marah* (he/she will reprimand us) in lines 4, 6 and 8. Although the word *marah* in the literal translation is associated with one's emotion of being angry or upset, in this context of use, it refers to the action of reprimanding. Plus, the constant use of the word *marah* (reprimand) should not be ignored as it intensifies M2's accusation on the teacher, which at the same time shows that he refrains from taking responsibility for his weak performance in that particular subject.

#### Excerpt 13

- 
- [1] F3: *Saya perlukan private teacher yang boleh ajar saya*  
 I need a private tutor that can teach me  
 I need a private tutor to teach me
- [2] *ataupun tuition / tapi saya tak nampak / saya dah minta tuition*  
 or tuition classes / but I don't see / I have asked for tuition  
 or tuition classes / but I don't see it / I have asked for tuition
- [3] *sebelum sekolah lagi saya cakap / er encik / saya nak tuition /*  
 before school I said / sir / I want tuition /  
 before school I had already said / sir / I want tuition /
- [4] *saya sebab saya kelas Sains saya perlu bantuan daripada*  
 I because I am Science class I need help from  
 I because I am in the Science class I need help from
- [5] *seseorang yang boleh menolong saya / tapi dia orang cakap*  
 someone who can help me / but they said  
 someone who can help me / but they said
- [6] *dia orang akan usahakan / dia orang akan usahakan dan*
-

---

	they will try	/ they will try and
	they will try	/ they will try and
[7]	<b>sekarang dah bulan lapan</b>	/ <b>still lagi tak ada</b> /
	now already month eight	/ still there is none /
	now it is already the month of August	/ there is still none /

---

In Excerpt 13, F3 highlights her desperate need for a private tutor for her weak subjects with the frequent use of the modal verb *perlu* (need) in line 1. However, when her request for tuition classes has not been granted (line 2), she shifts the blame to the caregivers. F3 provides the duration of time since the last she made the request in the utterances *sebelum sekolah lagi saya cakap* (before school I had already said) (line 3) and *sekarang dah bulan lapan* (now it is already the month of August) (line 7) to illustrate that she has been waiting long for her request to be granted.

In the repeated utterance *dia orang akan usahakan* (they will try) in line 6, the use of the modal verb *akan* (will) indicates that the foster caregivers promise to try to look for tutors. However, they appear to be given false promises when C12's request has not been granted. Additionally, in the utterance *still lagi tak ada* (there is still none) in line 7, the adverbs 'still' and *lagi* (still) reinforce C12's dismay with the management of the foster home for ignoring her request for months. F3's accusation on her caregivers could be taken as a strategy to mitigate her responsibility for her poor performance in school.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study reveals that male and female foster children employ various linguistic features in responding to their poor academic performance. The male foster children use features such as adjectives, direct statements, denial and accusation; whereas the female foster children employ adjectives, direct statements, intensifying adverbs and accusation.

The use of adjectives, direct statements and accusation are prominent in the responses of both male and female foster children. Although adjectives occurred in both genders' responses during the interviews, the male foster children use fewer adjectives and are 'less expressive' (Davies, 2003) than the female foster children when voicing the needs of their academic performance. The male foster children prefer to employ the adjective *susah* (difficult) or *susah sikit* (a little bit difficult) to avoid displaying any signs of weaknesses (Adler & Adler, 1998). They also tend to use denial as a strategy to pretend to not being affected by their problems in order to hide their deficiencies; whereas in actual fact, it may not necessarily be what it seems. By not revealing their problems, they conform to their macho behaviour (Nayak & Kehily, 1996). Consequently, the male foster children's use of language makes it difficult for teachers to identify the challenges they encounter.

The female foster children, on the contrary, are more expressive in highlighting their weaknesses in subjects that they perform poorly in. They frequently use adjectives such as *lemah* (weak), *pening* (headache), *malas* (lazy), *bodoh* (stupid) and *susah* (difficult). Additionally, intensifying adverbs appears to be a strategy used only by them to express emotion (Torppa, 2010) such as concern as well as to reveal the challenges they encountered. Hence, the female foster children's willingness to share the problems allows the teachers to provide assistance with ease.

It may be concluded that the female foster children are better at expressing their concern and revealing about their weakest subjects than the males (Kring & Gordon, 1998; Gross & John, 1998). Although spoken words may be useful in communicating the problem one's encounter in studies, one of the factors that might still influence speakers' choice of words is "the closeness of their relationship with others" (Kuang, Wong & David, 2015). It is, therefore, significant to establish good rapport among teachers and the foster children in school as they might be more willing to express their academic problems.

Even though the sample size is small, both male and female foster children can be seen voicing their problems differently in terms of linguistics features. The different linguistics features use between the male and female foster children in voicing their academic needs cannot be ignored as they are significant. Therefore, they should be treated differently by teachers. Moreover, due attention should be given to the academic performance of foster children to ensure they perform better, especially in their core subjects (i.e. Mathematics, Science, English language, Malay language), which they are very weak in. Hence, there should be intervention programs to help these children perform better academically in order to secure a better future.

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