

Investigating The Impact of Gender Bias on Classroom Interaction : Second Year EFL Students as a Case Study

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ABSTRACT:

Gender bias in educational contexts negatively affects classroom interaction and learning processes in EFL settings. The current study explored the effects of gender bias on classroom interaction for second-year EFL students at Dr. Moulay Tahar University and explored how it affected the students' participation and involvement in classroom activities. The study investigated both conscious and unconscious gender bias and opted for the use of student questionnaires, and interviews with 8 EFL teachers, as a mixed approach to collect and analyze the data. Findings uncover the pervasive nature of gender bias within these classrooms, detrimentally affecting the experiences of both female students and male teachers, consequently impeding academic progress. To mitigate these challenges, the study offers practical strategies for educators to identify and address gender bias, emphasizing the importance of gender-inclusive language and diverse instructional approaches.

Keywords: EFL, Gender Bias, Gender-inclusive language, Mixed method approach, Dr Moulay Tahar University

1. Introduction :

Various factors such as age, gender, personality, geographic location, socioeconomic situation, cultural background, teaching methodologies, and curriculum materials could influence students' attitudes toward learning a new language. According to Gardner (1975), gender is a highly influential variable. Without a doubt, the gender of teachers and learners significantly impacts the teaching/learning process. Research on gender-related issues in the EFL classroom has shown that gender bias is a significant obstacle to effective instruction. Gender bias refers to the unequal treatment, expectations, and opportunities given to individuals based on their gender, which can greatly impact classroom dynamics. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of its consequences is crucial for establishing a more equitable and inclusive educational setting for every student and teacher.

Research questions:

1. What is the influence of Gender Bias on classroom interaction?
2. How does Gender Bias impact the experience of EFL teachers and learners inside the classroom?
3. What is the role of the teacher in diminishing the phenomena inside the EFL classroom?

Research Hypotheses:

1. Increased Gender Bias Negatively Affects Classroom interaction
2. The presence of gender bias creates differing classroom experiences for EFL teachers and learners based on their gender,
3. EFL teachers play a crucial role in identifying and proactively addressing gender biases through pedagogy, and classroom management strategies

In order to test the hypotheses, the researchers have used a mixed method approach encompassing qualitative and quantitative tools to cover the numerical and the qualitative aspects of this phenomenon

2. Literature Review

The EFL classroom is designed to equalize language acquisition conditions for students. Nevertheless, numerous studies identify a hidden but formidable obstacle – gender bias – that sometimes robs these efforts, prolongs the learning process for some students, and reveals an unequal learning atmosphere. Gender bias is a traditional challenge in education. These are the attitudes and beliefs towards gender, which are often implicit and initially affect the way students and students interact. The bias is not always explicit and purposeful. As Padedilla (2019) points out, it can be an unconscious gender bias. It means that a teacher can scarcely realize how she or he believes in masculinity or femininity. Still, those perceptions will unduly affect their performance and can lead to differentiation in treatment (Guacira & Pickering, 2019). This bias might take a relatively unnoticeable form because a teacher may call on boys unconsciously more often and praise them for demanding or confident behavior, whereas correcting girls for trivial mistakes creates an environment where students feel unwelcomed Cheng, 2013). Consequently, their conducted self-confidence will be significantly lower, and they will be more prone to disengagement, affecting their academic achievement. Understanding the difficulty of identifying gender bias unconsciously standpoint might be helpful in a more equitable classroom. For example, in their studies of mainstream classrooms, Sadker and Sadker (1986) reveal similar patterns, indicating a large-scale social factor in teachers' behaviors. This influences how often teachers call on boys instead of girls to answer a question, even if the latter are as ready to participate or more. However, the problem may not end here; as for the material, EFL research demonstrates that the choice of texts also plays a significant factor. According to Lynch (2008), a substantial amount of EFL texts abuse stereotypical representations of the gender role. Naturally, this helps sustain the

expectations while limiting the scope of identities students are encouraged to consider in the language. According to Sadker & Sadker (2001), boys are frequently depicted by society as "active, independent, and aggressive" and are encouraged to conform to these characteristics. Nevertheless, this depiction fails to conform to the academic responsibilities and standards, which can lead to disagreements and potentially give rise to mental distress, anxiety, and aggressive conduct among individuals. Conversely, Sunderland (2000:153) argued that excessive preoccupation with identifying gender bias could result in a diversion of attention from the primary objectives of these educational resources: learning a foreign language and, to some degree, developing an appreciation for the cultures in which the language is spoken. Sunderland (2000) does not reject the notion that gender prejudice can have a detrimental effect on language acquisition. She emphasizes the significance of teachers not shying away from using EFL resources that exhibit gender prejudice to prevent harm to students. However, Yilmaz (2012) discovered that English texts and instructional materials did display prejudices against women. Nevertheless, he observed a noteworthy enhancement in the latest editions. This indicates that authors are increasingly cognizant of the issue and are actively endeavoring to discover more effective solutions.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), classrooms function as communal areas where both male and female students commence the process of learning. Nevertheless, the circumstances students come across frequently expose noticeable disparities. These discrepancies arise from the differential treatment of students depending on their gender by teachers, which includes differences in the level of attention given, the expectations held, and the disciplinary measures taken in the classroom. Teachers may inadvertently reinforce traditional gender beliefs in their classes by unconsciously favoring the male gender. According to Reay (2001: 153), females' misbehavior is generally perceived as a personal flaw, while boys' misconduct is viewed as a manifestation of their need to establish themselves.

As far as students' practices are concerned , Lawrenz (1987: 258) found that students' opinions of their teacher choices were influenced by an inclination and attraction towards teachers of the opposite gender, regardless of teaching ability and academic accomplishment. Female students frequently showed a preference for engaging with male instructors as opposed to their female counterparts. Hence, comprehending the influence of learners with gender bias on teaching practices, interaction, and classroom dynamics would help improve the teachers' experience in the EFL classroom.

2.1 Algerian Context

Research on gender bias in Algeria is rather limited compared to studies

conducted in other nations. Factors such as resource limitations and cultural constraints contribute to this scarcity. Nevertheless, current research provides a valuable understanding of gender biases and obstacles encountered by students. In a study conducted by Mallek (2016), it was discovered that English teachers at Larbi Ben M'hidi University do not typically display gender bias. However, it was also observed that there is not a great emphasis on promoting contact among the teachers. In a study conducted by Sekrane (2017), it was shown that there is a presence of gender bias in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) middle school classrooms in the cities of Mascara and Mostaganem. This bias is influenced by factors such as student behavior, academic level, discipline, and intelligence. Elbachir (2021) emphasized the presence of gender prejudice in teacher-student interaction, even while teachers hold favorable attitudes. Additional research is required to tackle this issue in Algerian classrooms where English is taught as a foreign language.

3. Methods and Materials

The researchers opted for a mixed-method approach to gather data. The primary objective for utilizing mixed methods is to capitalize on the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative data in research endeavors.

In addition, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches can successfully reduce the inherent constraints associated with each method. The researchers took into consideration ethical concerns to comply with the norms and standards of this specialized field.

3.1 . Participants

The study targeted Dr. Moulay Tahar University, Saida Algeria, undergraduate second-year LMD English students. Male and female students participated. All are adult students with diverse origins and English proficiency. The population was around 231 second-year EFL students and 13 EFL teachers. Six groups were selected for classroom observation, the first data-gathering instrument. We observed modules taught by a male and female teacher to compare students' and teachers' interactional behaviors. Our second research tool, the questionnaire, was sent to 60 randomly selected students (5 females and 5 males from each of the six observed groups). In addition, our third research tool interviewed 8 EFL teachers at Saida University's English Language Department (4 male and 4 female).

3.2. Research instruments

The researchers employed a semi-structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews and. The researcher gave the questionnaire to the target demographic in the second semester of the same academic year. The questionnaire asked close-ended and open-ended questions to assess their attitudes. This variety of questions provides organized response alternatives for qualitative data analysis, while the close-end ones measure attitudes. while the checklist evaluates the extent to which teachers actively

engage students through encouraging questions, monitoring comprehension, and employing various strategies to elicit participation from both genders.

4. Results

4.1. Students' questionnaire

The key questions for data collecting and the simpler ones for analysis have been chosen by the researchers.

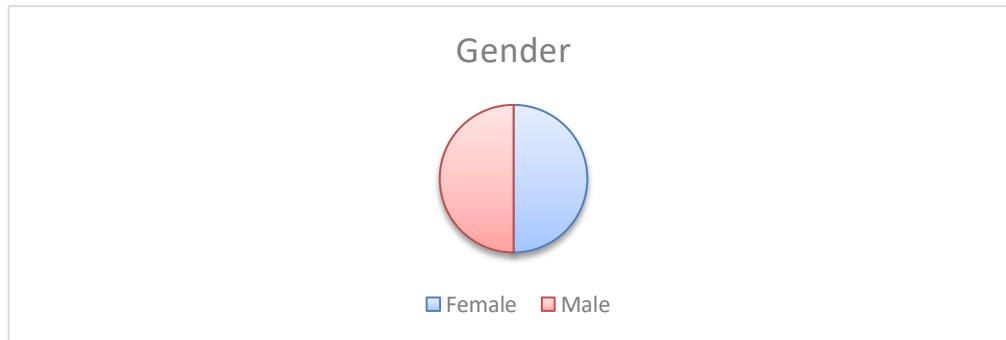


Figure1. Teachers' gender

In the first section of the questionnaire, we asked the participants about their gender about 30 participants (50%) were male teachers, and about 30 were female ones. The study utilized a sample that was evenly distributed between genders.

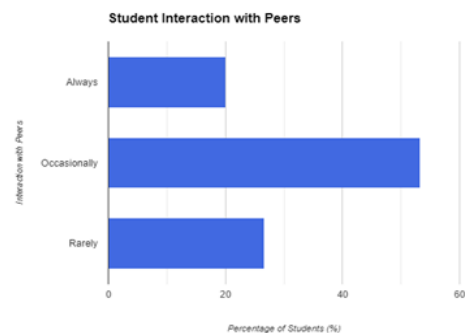
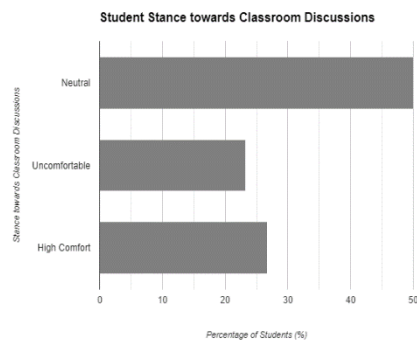


Figure 2. Student Stance towards Classroom Discussions Figure 3. Students Stance Towards Peer Interaction

The study reveals that 50.0% of students, or 30 participants, have a neutral stance towards classroom discussions, with 23.3% feeling uncomfortable. However, 26.7% of students, or 26.7%, express high comfort.

Students' interactions with peers vary, with 20.0% always engaging, 53.3% occasionally, and 26.7% rarely. This suggests that while some students engage occasionally, a significant number experience infrequent interaction due to various reasons, including gender, which indicates further investigation.

Teachers gender	Counts	Percentages
Male	40	66.7%
Female	20	33.3%

Table 1. Teachers' influence on students

The study showed that male teachers were more influential than female teachers, with 40 students identifying male teachers as more influential. However, the impact of influence cannot be solely measured by numerical representation, as factors like teaching style and rapport with students also play a significant role. Therefore, the quality of interactions and effective communication are key factors in determining influence. So the research asked a follow-up open-ended question to gain further insights into the dynamics between teachers and students.

Students identified qualities like approachability, humor, and coolness as influential teachers. Female students preferred male teachers for their fun and dedicated nature, One Female student mentioned "My favorite teacher is a male, and being taught by a male is funnier, for example, this teacher has a great sense of humor and he is dedicated to his job" while male students valued their flexibility and natural approachability. They also valued teachers who fostered interaction and connection after classes, such as small talks outside of academia. Examples include "He allows us to interact after classes are done" and "We always have small talks besides academia." However, few students emphasized feeling comfortable and respected in class. Female teachers were praised for their ability to make students feel comfortable in their classes and their positive energy. For instance, One female student stated "my favorite teacher is a female teacher her qualities are letting us feel comfortable in her class" and "It is all about the character of the teacher not about gender but mostly female teachers are the nicest" Overall, students valued teachers who exhibited these qualities and fostered a positive learning environment.

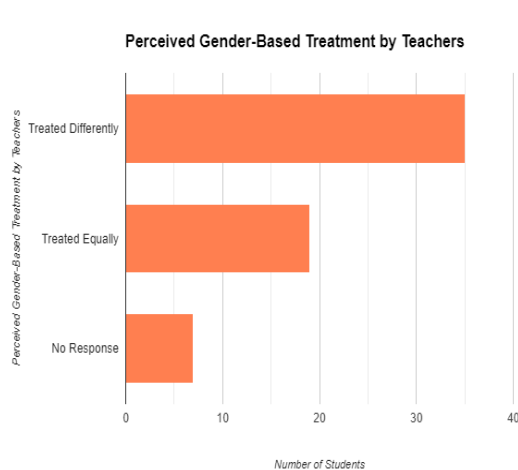


Figure 4. Perceived Gender-Based treatment

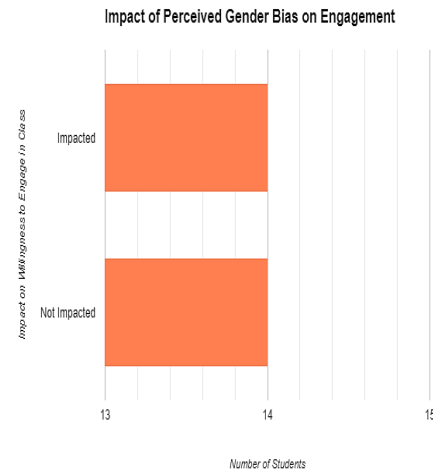
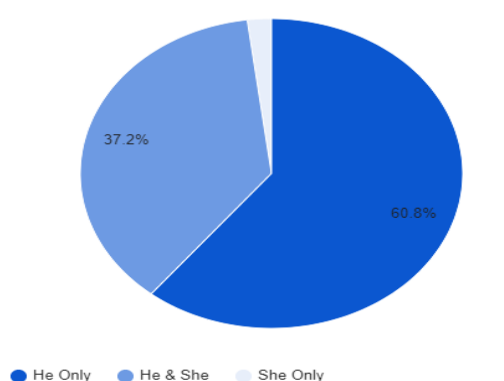


Figure 5. Impact of gender bias on engagement

The study revealed that 35 out of 60 students reported being treated differently by teachers based on their gender, with 19 students denying such unequal treatment. 14 students reported that this affected their willingness to engage, while an equal number had no impact. This indicates a high incidence of perceived gender bias in teacher-student interactions, with a diverse individual response to such treatment. Eight students shared their experiences with gender-based treatment from teachers, revealing the complex consequences it has on student engagement. Students A and B emphasized the importance of mutual respect stating that “ “ I am a person who gives respect to her surroundings and expects others to respect me as well, therefore when some teachers disrespect me I would never be the same”. Student C felt that being treated differently led to negative emotions and strained relationships with teachers. Student D preferred female teacher classes with no distractions, emphasizing that by stating that «I feel more comfortable in female teacher classes, it is only about the module no side comments ». Student E expressed a desire for fairness and consistency in teacher-student interactions, while Student F and Student G showed sensitivity or hesitation to discuss personal experiences of gender bias due to the power distance between students and teachers. The responses highlight the importance of understanding and addressing gender bias in education.

Pronoun Usage by Teachers in Classroom Examples

**Figure 6.** Pronoun usage by teachers in the classroom

English is generally considered gender-neutral, but it contains gendered words and expressions. 60% of respondents reported teachers' constant use of the pronoun "he" in classroom examples, suggesting a common pattern of using masculine pronouns. 36.66% use both "he" and "she" pronouns, suggesting a tendency towards gender-neutral or inclusive language usage. However, only 2% use "she," suggesting a preference for masculine pronouns.

When students were asked if they believe that gender bias and stereotypes exist in their EFL classroom, The majority representing 70% answered accordingly, confirming that they have observed stereotypes or assumptions about their learning based on their gender. The 30% minority who answered negatively may either genuinely perceive an absence of such stereotypes or biases, or they may not be fully aware of them.

The biases in teacher-student rapports as some students pointed out were instances where teachers seemed to favor male students over female students. One student claimed that "Some teachers just prefer more males." Students also talked about what they had noticed from gender stereotypes being reinforced in the ordinary discourse during the classes, such as the idea that women should stick to traditional household tasks and stereotypical patterns and views on feminine and masculine roles.

4.2. The Interview

The majority of the teachers participating in this research are holders of PhD degrees in the English language and its literature, Regarding age range, the group consisted of four teachers in the 29-30 age group, two at 31 years old, to a couple at 37, suggesting that the sample was consisting from youthful yet mature educators at Dr.Moulay Tahar University. The sample interviewed expressed that they do not have any difficulties when it comes to dealing with the student's new generation i.e. Generation Z. Some teachers even stressed that they are constantly updating their

knowledge about the cultural nuances and the different trends stating that “.... I'm not finding any difficulties working with Gen Z because I'm keeping up with all cultural aspects because when you are teaching the language you have to consider the cultural background and the lifestyles of students to understand the language usage and understand new generations better.” However, the rest elaborated on their initial answers by saying “ Though it is under control for the moment, it is getting worse”.

When Teachers were asked about the gender dynamics inside their EFL classrooms, they expressed that females are showing positive attitudes toward the learning of English in formal contexts, One Teacher stated that: “first of all, girls are more motivated and dedicated than boys, it has nothing to do with their biology but, they have both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation”. Another teacher stated, “ Females tend to excel when studying English, ask each promotion who's the top of the class and it's 99% a female”. Despite their excellence in their academic pursuits, Teachers are aware of unconscious gender bias and its potential consequences, such as prejudices and inequality in student treatment and grading. Some teachers admit to miscommunicating and may be perceived as biased, One male teacher commented saying: “ It does happen with me I tend to prefer some students of the same gender as me. And I tend to have some target students that I interact with and those the ones that always attend and participate regardless of their gender” In the same vein another male teacher admitted “ I tend to prefer male students more, I favor them because we always end up having such captivating conversations”. Educators hold diverse views on strategies to reduce gender bias and promote an inclusive teaching environment. Some advocate for avoiding gender topics, while others believe in treating students equally. Some teachers believe in treating everyone as equals and avoiding sensitive topics like marriage and divorce. Others suggest taming opposite genders and building trust with male students. Building strong characters and assessing mutual respect is also suggested. The consensus is that gender should not dominate the teaching environment, with efforts focused on fairness and equal engagement with all students.

5. Discussion

The impact of gender bias on students' experiences in second-year EFL classrooms is investigated in this study. The results highlight issues brought up in earlier studies while also illuminating particular facets in this EFL setting. Consistent with previous research, a considerable proportion of students (23.3%) expressed uneasiness during class discussions. This unease was caused by a lack of self-assurance, a fear of stereotypes, and a sense of inclusivity that was lacking. Moreover, a troubling percentage (35) reported that they were the target of remarks, jokes, and even exclusion because of teacher bias. The study deepens the understanding of gender stereotypes in the classroom. Students felt that there were biased jokes, stereotypical roles for women, and a preference for male students, just like in previous studies. The

"male norm" and the idea of "man-superiority" were highlighted by observations that supported these beliefs. Surprisingly, 60% of teacher examples used masculine pronouns ("he"). This is consistent with research on pronoun usage in educational settings published by Lee (2015) and Pauwels & Winter (2006). While comparisons to past research reveal ongoing issues, this study pinpoints specific areas for improvement within EFL classrooms. By addressing these concerns and actively promoting inclusivity, educators can create a more balanced learning environment where all students feel empowered to participate and succeed. According to studies by Bügel and Buunk (1996) in the Netherlands and Sedmak (2022) in Croatian EFL classrooms, teachers have shown gender-based differential treatment. This study's findings at Dr. Moulay Tahar University in Saida, Algeria, which showed that teachers frequently give male students both positive and negative attention—sometimes at the expense of ignoring the eagerness of female students—are consistent with this conclusion. The study's findings suggest that gender bias exists in interactions between educators and learners worldwide, extending beyond national borders.

This study identifies particular areas for improvement in EFL classrooms, while comparisons with previous research indicate persistent problems. Teachers can establish a more balanced learning environment where all students feel empowered to participate and succeed by addressing these issues and actively promoting inclusivity.

6 Conclusion

Research in the area of gender bias revealed that it continues to be a significant factor influencing the students well-being inside the EFL classroom, All in all, students' discomfort stemmed from low self-confidence, fear of being stereotyped, and . a perceived lack of inclusivity However, direct teacher bias, referring to comments, jokes, and varied participation opportunities, only raised concerned concerning the equity in those classrooms. The research also highlighted the prevalence of the "male norm" in classrooms. Students perceived a preference for male students, stereotypical roles for females, and biased jokes. Observations and the extensive use of masculine pronouns in teacher examples further supported this notion. Firstly, students firmly believed that males were the teacher's target students, and females were always thrown into stereotypical roles. Secondly, gender-based jokes and examples were biased making students feel excluded and isolated. The findings of the study revealed that educators need to be more mindful of their biases, especially the unconscious ones. In this way, they create an inclusive environment where students will push through stereotypes to participate and bean active parts of classroom interaction this can be achieved through the promotion of civilized discussion and treating students based on their attainments and what they bring from unique experiences to the class instead of their gender.

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