

Algerian EFL Students' Perception of the Impact of Teachers' Gender: The Case of Tlemcen University

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Abstract

In the last three decades, the study of gender in relation to EFL research has gained greater importance. The gender-based difference has been widely studied showing the role played by the teacher as perceived by university students. A teacher's gender is undeniably a significant factor in influencing the learning process and thus bears some impact on learners' achievement. This study explores students' perception of the impact of teachers' gender in the EFL classroom at Tlemcen University in Algeria. This research bears some significance as to the achievements reached by the learners based on how they may be affected by their teachers' gender, and thus it attempts to question their preferences and their relationship with their teachers. The main question considers the impact of teachers' gender on Algerian EFL learners'. An open-ended questionnaire was administered to forty first-year students. The findings show that students do not mind studying in mixed-gender classes and being taught by both genders. They seem to have a more positive attitude towards the role of men in the teaching profession than their female colleagues, though female teachers outperform males in interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: Algerian EFL students, gender impact, mixed-gender classes, motivation, Student's perceptions, teaching

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Introduction

Several variables including age, gender, personality, geographic location, socioeconomic status, cultural background, teaching strategies, and curriculum materials may influence students' attitudes toward learning a new language. Gardner (1975) suggests that gender is one of the most significantly influential variables. Undeniably, the gender of both teachers and learners is an important factor that influences the teaching/learning process. Studies in gender-related differences concerned with language teaching recognize that gender as a working variable is dependent on the classroom environment. A safe and relaxed classroom is necessary to create a supportive learning environment for EFL learners, enhance their self-confidence and help them learn the language rapidly and successfully. Studies such as Canada and Pringle (1995), Chavez (2000), Dee (2006), Duffy, Warren, and Walsh (2001), etc., have pointed out that gender affects classrooms in various ways. For example, Williams (1993) and Gray and Leith (2004) reported that the gender of the teacher influences the learning process. One of the reasons is that male and female teachers treat girls and boys differently even if they are not always aware of doing so. Therefore, this research is guided by the overall questioning of Algerian EFL learners' perception towards their teachers' gender and the resulting impact on the learning process in class. The attempt is to consider the following sub-questions:

1. By whom do EFL learners prefer being taught? Women teachers or men teachers?
2. With whom do they have a better interpersonal relationships? With a lady teacher or with a male teacher?
- 3.

The significance of this research is to show the importance of the teachers' gender on the EFL students' achievements. Based on our own experience, it may be hypothesized that on the whole EFL learners prefer being taught by female teachers for their sensibility and better personal relationship, though there is always a proportion of students who feel better with men teachers.

This paper will first offer an overview of the relationship between gender and EFL teaching and its impact on students' achievements. The method section briefly describes students' perception and influence of teachers' gender during EFL classes. An open-ended questionnaire is designed for such a goal. The last sections include results, discussion, limitations of the study and a conclusion.

Literature Review

During the last decades, research on gender studies has increasingly gained ground. While a considerable body of literature has examined teaching theories and methods including SL/FL (Banning, 2005; Canale & Swain, 1980; Carpenter, 2006; Ellis, 1994; Nagasundram, Swanto, Soekarno & Din, 2021, Richardson, 2005; Widdowson 1978, 1979; to name a few), the investigation of the relationship between gender and education is relatively limited (Holmes, 1991; Tannen, 1996 and Sunderland, 1998, 2000). For example, Sunderland (2000) has reviewed language and gender in second and foreign language education with a special focus on gender; teachers, professional organisations and gender; new theorisations of language and gender; etc. Regarding the domain of education and under the influence of the feminist movement in the 1970s, the role of gender has become topical among researchers to determine whether the gender of the teacher and students can influence the process of language learning. Nyikos (1990) argued that there is "a popularly accepted notion that modern language study is a woman's area which, in terms

of jobs, leads to female dominance in the language teaching staff of schools” (p. 274). Studies on ESL/EFL have explored the relationship between gender and EFL teaching (e.g., Barrios Fernández & Riudavets-Barcons 2021; Pica, Berducci, Holliday, Lewis, & Newman, 1991; Young & Milanovic, 1992). These studies have shown that EFL students' attitudes and perceptions concerning the gender of the teacher may positively or negatively influence their classroom achievements. Highlighting the importance of gender in ESL classrooms, Tannen (1996) assumed that “It is important, however, to bear in mind that gender-related patterns dovetail with all other dynamics of language behaviour: Ethnic, class, regional, and age differences all affect speaking styles, along with such influences as sexual orientation, professional training, and individual personality” (p. 341). She went on to say that “Interest in gender-related patterns of classroom discourse will enrich an understanding of the dynamics of the TESOL classroom” (p. 343).

On the other hand, the EFL teacher's gender also affects their attitude towards their profession. Specialists have found that female teachers have more positive attitudes towards the teaching profession than males. Dee (2006) maintained that there is a causal effect between the teachers' and students' genders and that “the teacher acts as a gender-specific role model, regardless of what he or she says or does. [...] students are more engaged, behave more appropriately, and perform at a higher level when taught by one who shares their gender” (p. 70). Teaching has nothing to do with one's gender. Beyond the prevailing teachers' gender stereotypes, male teachers are similarly as caring and affectionate as women. Above all, a good teacher is someone who can connect with the students and plan the lessons consequently.

Many studies like those of Canada and Pringle (1995) and Duffy, et.al. (2001) have explored the influence of gender on teaching/learning. Lawrenz (1987) found that students have preferences for opposite-gender teachers. Chavez (2000) noticed that classes taught by male teachers were more teacher-centred classrooms as they monopolised discussion. While learning, students of different genders react differently depending on the teacher's gender. Chavez (2000) explained that, compared to their male classmates, female students are more cooperative with their teachers. He explained that they use less humour than males and are more concerned with conforming to teachers' and teaching expectations. Consequently, teachers worked more with female students than males because girls were more willing to interact with their teachers and participate during lectures than their male classmates. Research on gender-based differences in the teaching/learning process has also provided major facts that positive attitudes between teachers and students are necessary for academic and personal enrichment for the students.

Gender and EFL Learning and Teaching

Researchers in second and foreign language learning assume that gender is substantially responsible for differences in language learning behaviour and resulting outputs (e.g., Freeman & McElhinny, 1996; Sadker & Sadker, 1992; Sommers & Lawrence, 1992; Swann, 1992). Gender is a significant factor in EFL language teaching/learning because adequately described in a binary manner. Markham (1988) argued that ESL learners display higher levels of comprehension with male teachers seen as more expert than female teachers. However, Chavez (2001) observed that female students react more positively to female than male teachers.

Moreover, in second language learning, variables such as age (e.g., Chavez, 2000, 2001), motivation and beliefs about language learning (e.g., Horwitz, 1987, 1988), anxiety (e.g., Young, 1994), gender (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989) have been shown to affect language learning in terms of strategic behaviour and achievement. In EFL classrooms, when teachers share students' first language and cultural background, it may help to facilitate the language teaching/learning progression.

The ultimate goal of EFL teachers is to help students become increasingly proficient in the language. Particularly in an EFL language setting, the classroom offers the primary opportunity to learn and practice the necessary skills.

Method

As mentioned above, the present paper aims to examine the impact of teachers' gender on EFL learning to explore students' preferences regarding gender. To achieve such an objective a quantitative method is used. The study uses a survey which consists of an open-ended questionnaire designed to explore students' perception and influence of teachers' gender in the EFL classroom.

Participants

The study includes a group of 40 EFL students enrolled in the first year of the English degree in the department of English at the University of Tlemcen in Algeria during 2020/2021. The participants were selected randomly. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was difficult to fully carry out the survey.

Research instruments

The instrument used was an open-ended questionnaire containing seven questions. Out of the forty questionnaires administered to the students, only thirty-one were completed and returned. All the students were taught by male and female teachers of different subjects. The participants were asked to mention their gender and answer six questions. The questionnaire, which also includes a part for suggestions, consisted of six questions about the students themselves and their teachers. The data collection procedure was fully completed at the end of the session. Before applying the material, brief information about the study and the aims needed to be achieved were explained to the participants. The data collected from the students' responses to the questionnaire items were computed and converted to percentages and graphs.

Results

The examination of the data obtained has revealed some interesting findings on the influence of gender in an EFL classroom; these are presented in the tables and graphs below. The first question just considers the students' gender.

Our teaching experience in the department confirms that in general more girls choose to study languages than boys, and indeed the lists of enrolled students this academic year – and all previous years – show that female students doing English make up more than twice the number of males, approximately two-thirds females vs. one-third males. However, because of the pandemic, very few students participated in the present study with equivalent numbers of female and male

informants, 16 vs. 15, respectively, i.e., roughly a fifty-fifty proportion, which easily reveals gender differences and similarities in students' reactions.

The second question tries to elicit whether students prefer to study in same-gender or mixed-gender classes.

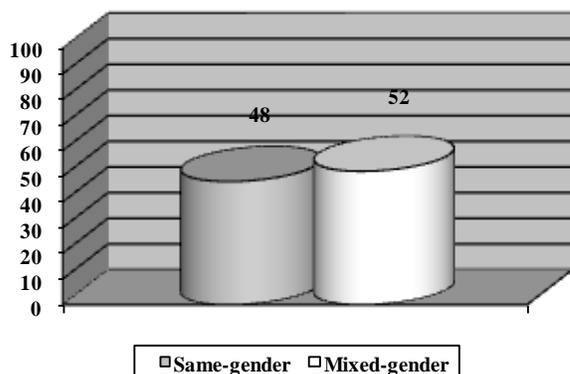


Figure 1. Students' preference to study in same-gender or mixed-gender classes

The results show that slightly more than half of the participants (52%) prefer to study in mixed-gender classes while 48% have a preference for same-gender classes. They believe that mixed-gender classes provide equal opportunities for both males and females to interact in various ways to learn English, and those same-gender classes do not reflect reality.

The third question exposes the students' preference as to teachers' gender, i.e., whether to be taught by female teachers, male teachers or both.

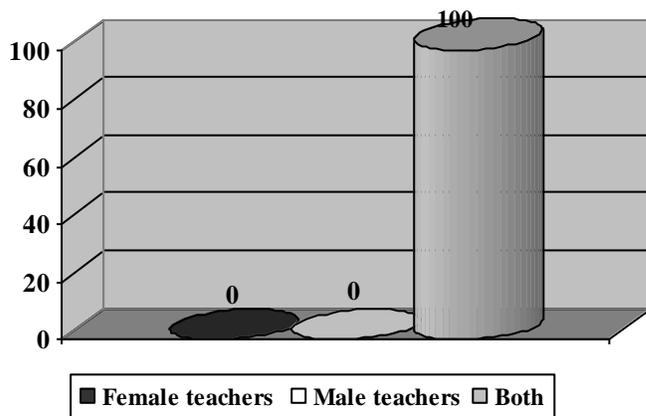


Figure 2. Preference for the teachers' gender

The findings indicate no difference in having male or female teachers. Students do not have a preference for one gender over another. They all declare to prefer to be taught by both genders.

The fourth question tries to find out what students believe about teachers' talent: Are male teachers better than female teachers? Or is it the other way around?

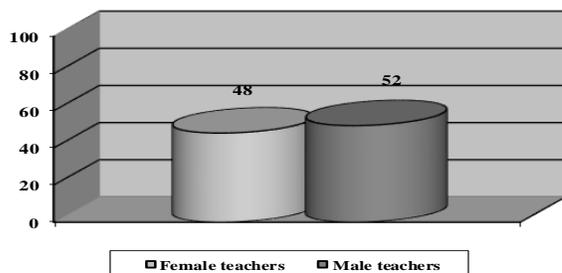


Figure 3. Students' beliefs on who are better teachers

Though most of the students believe that both genders are good teachers, there is a slight preference for male teachers over female teachers. 52% of the participants declare that male teachers are better teachers than female ones.

Question five concerns the students' perception of who motivates them more, female or male teachers.

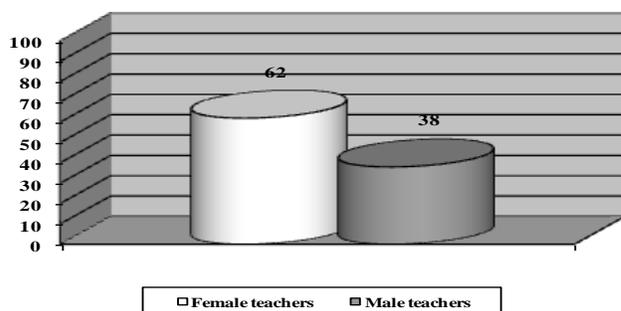


Figure 4. Motivating teachers

The results indicate that students perceive that their teachers do not motivate them equally. For 62% of the participants, female teachers are more motivating than their male fellows (38%). Women in general are felt to be more supportive and motivating than male teachers. Students associate such behaviour more with mothers than with fathers.

Question six elicits students' perception of whether teachers discriminate between students because of their gender.

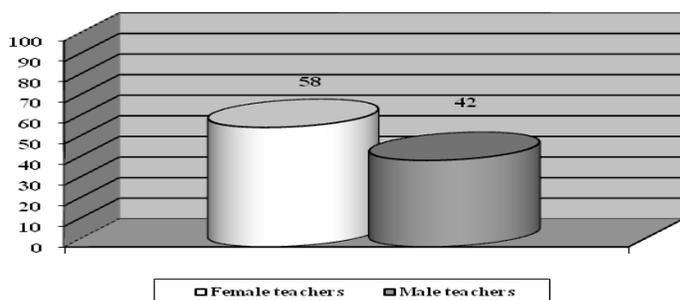


Figure 5. Teachers' gender bias towards students

Students believe that female and male teachers behave differently in class. The results reveal that female teacher (58%) are more discriminating than their male colleagues (42%). Noticeably, it is expected that women are more predisposed to show their emotions and sensitivity than males.

Question seven tries to show to whom students confide more when they have problems, female or male teachers.

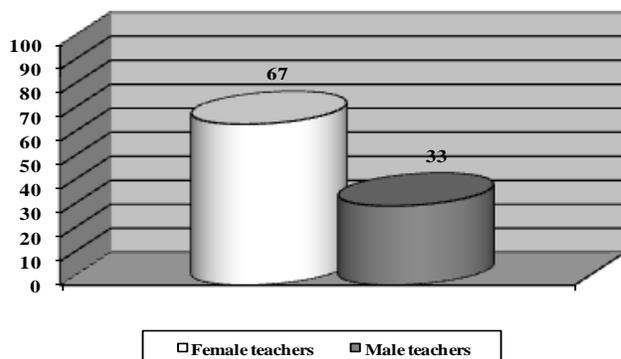


Figure 6. Students' preference to confide in their teachers

While, 67% of the students declare they prefer to confide in female teachers, 33% prefer to talk to male teachers. These differences between females and males are not surprising as women, in general, tend to be more emotional and sensitive. They are also considered to be more understanding and take care of others than males.

The findings indicate that students privilege studying in mixed-gender classes and do not mind being taught by men or women teachers, a fact that reflects the diversity of real life. However, it is also believed that male teachers are better teachers than female ones in certain pedagogical aspects. On the other hand, as regards the interpersonal level, students feel that female teachers are more caring and exhibit more warmth and nurturing qualities than male teachers.

Discussion

Regarding the first research question, the findings disclose that students wish to be taught by both genders with some specific roles attributed to each gender. On the other hand, concerning the second research question, results show that male teachers receive more positive attitudes concerning their role as teachers, while women teachers surpass males in interpersonal relationships with students.

The results bring out four major outcomes. The first significant finding is the dominance of female over male students during EFL classes. It confirms the general trend according to which language studies are "girls' domain" (Sunderland, 1998). Moreover, as assumed by Nyikos (1990), the fact that women are more inclined to do language studies explains females' dominance as teachers. For example, in the department where the investigation is carried out, there are more female than male EFL teachers.

The second outcome reveals that students prefer to study in mixed-gender classes and do not mind being taught by both genders. Teachers' genders seem to have no importance when learning. The advantage of mixed-gender classes is that it reproduces life diversity and prepares students for the real world. On the other hand, they favour mixed-teaching gender because they have always been taught by both genders from their early childhood starting from primary school. It may be suggested that students seek affection and patience among female teachers and at the same time assertiveness and authority among male teachers. Additionally, when taught by both women and men, students take teachers as role models better understand how to behave with both genders that are similar and different from them positively and create good cohesion within the classroom.

The third outcome reveals a more positive attitude towards the role of men in the teaching profession than their female colleagues. However, though several studies like Centra and Gaubatz (2000), Feldman (1992), Islahi (2013), and Mullola et al. (2011) state that there are no significant differences in teaching approaches between male and female teachers, our results show that male teachers are slightly thought of as better than their female colleagues concerning their teaching capacity. Such belief is probably based on the fact that male teachers are more effective and less emotional. It seems that for university students, who are autonomous learners, at the university level the most important thing is knowledge and gender is perhaps less important than in primary and secondary schools where pupils need more attention and educational support from their teachers. The results also show that both genders are good teachers and that for the students there is a slight dominance in favour of male teachers.

The fourth outcome is related to the student-teacher relationship. Female teachers outperform males in interpersonal relationships. In addition, they are believed to better motivate the students and at the same generate gender bias between them than male teachers. On the other hand, students find it more suitable to confide in their female than male teachers. The results seem to comfort the idea that women in general are better teachers based on their experience as mothers. Students see in their female teachers a representation of an extension of the role mothers traditionally perform at home with their children. Another reason can be that female teachers are more likely to take into consideration their roles as a mother. However, some results reveal higher effectiveness on the part of male teachers. Contrariwise, teachers behave differently as far as the learners' gender is concerned and, thus, may create a gender bias. Dee (2006) explains that:

teachers, both men and women, treat boys and girls differently in the classroom. For example, some controversial evidence, based on classroom observations, suggests that both are likely to offer praise and remediation in response to comments by boys but mere acknowledgment to comments by girls. Some cognitive scientists suggest that teachers may subtly communicate different academic expectations of boys and girls and these biased expectations may become self-fulfilling. (p. 70)

According to Moos (1979), the relationship between students and teachers is an important dimension of class climate and 'personal relationships within the classroom' is among the most important dimensions of classroom atmosphere. Maslowski (2001) claims that classroom climate

is made up of the collective perceptions of students regarding the mutual relationships within the classroom in addition to the organization of the lessons and the learning tasks of the students.

Limitations of the Study

Due to the lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictive measures imposed on the university during the crisis, the research presents some limitations. The major one was that groups of students were divided into sub-groups and that their attendance was not compulsory. This explains the restricted number of participants in this investigation. To reach a larger number was quite difficult. To carry out the research, an online questionnaire was used but the participation was not consistent. Accordingly, the survey was carried out with the sample at hand during the class. It is aimed to expand the research to a larger group in the future.

Conclusion

This study has dealt with the gender-related difference between EFL teachers. Though teachers' role in the learning process is not merely determined by their gender, it tremendously contributes to the process. As far as gender-related teacher role is concerned, many of the findings show that EFL teachers' gender is an important factor from the students' point of view. On the whole, students seem to accept favourably gender diversity, though interpersonal relationships are more associated with female teachers while teaching competence is correlated with male teachers. In addition to gender as a variable, it is also important to investigate other factors affecting the teachers' role in the learning process such as age, personality, cultural diversity, interpersonal relationships, engagement, and empathy. Because of time and space limitations, this study has not considered other factors. Yet, further research in the area is recommended. Finally, it is hoped that this study has shed some light on the effect of gender differences in EFL learning.

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