

Saudi Students' Perception of Peers' Authority

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Abstract

This paper explores the obstacles that students from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia face when learning English in a writing course that demands critical thinking. Based on a study that took place over five months at the Virginia Tech Language and Culture Institute in spring 2012, it examines how gender differences shape Saudi students' perception of their peers' authority, and how, in turn, those perceptions affect their development as writers and critical thinkers when learning in an intensive writing course at the high intermediate level. The researcher documented data through three sources: classroom observation, interviews with ESL students and teachers, and student writing samples. The findings examine in particular the data on two students, one female and one male, to provide detailed examples of the nature and impact of gendered responses to peer authority. This study found that the Saudi female students more readily accepted their peers as authorities than the male students did. While, for cultural reasons, working in groups of mixed-sex was more problematic for female students than for male students, the female students were able to progress and assert their voices as writers. On the other hand, the male students, while starting with a stronger voice when orally participating in class, were less able to demonstrate their critical thinking in writing.

Keywords: critical thinking, ESL, peer authority, Saudi students, writing

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