Male Students’ Perceptions of Being Taught by Female Teachers under the Backdrop of Saudi Cultures and Traditions in ESL Classrooms

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Abstract
The study aims to investigate the perceptions of male students of being taught by female English Second Language (ESL) teachers and examine the efficiency of instructors in teaching English to male students under the restrictions of Saudi customs. Teaching male students of the opposite gender to whom they have not been exposed to prepared before in Saudi Arabia might have an impact on their feelings which may deter them from learning ESL successfully. Therefore, the study aims to answer the main research question; what are the male students’ perceptions of being taught by female ESL teachers in Saudi Arabia? The researcher employed a mixed-method design: A quantitative method, which consists of an ESL test and a 20-item questionnaire, which were distributed among ninety male students in Saudi Arabia to determine their language competence and feelings towards the opposite gender, and a qualitative method, which consists of semi-structured interviews with six ESL teachers and six learners. The study highlights the fact; although teaching male students to females in Saudi Arabia has slightly an impact on their feelings, such as feeling shy and not accepting of them, it does not negatively affect the learning of a second language. However, the efficiency of teaching ESL is the most considerable from the student’s perspective. The outcome of the study can essentially contribute to the development of learning ESL in the Saudi context; it demonstrates some barriers that female ESL teachers face in male classes and highlights some strategies to help female teachers easily interact with male students.

Keywords: Female teachers, gender, male students, perception, second language learning, ESL classrooms

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1. Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has placed great efforts into developing educational systems to prepare new generations who are the actual fortune of our nation. Education systems in KSA have been going through many reforms since 2014 (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). During this period; the Ministry of Education (MOE) has developed teachers of both genders, updated all curricula, including sciences, religion, and English, and changed the educational structures. For example, unlike before, MOE allows female instructors to teach male students. Indeed, various motives have led the Saudi MOE to take this decisive step in the education system. One of the most important reasons; is reducing the unemployment rate in Saudi Arabia, which has recently been noticed by the high rate of unemployment among females (Al-Anzi, 2014). Another reason; is we live in an age identified by globalization, in which the world has become a small town. Early in 2017, the Saudi government launched the Saudi Vision 2030, which shows their efforts improving all aspects of the development and well-being of the population. The Saudi Vision 2030 declares many goals related to the development in education and training systems that keep pace with the requirements of the times. The Saudi MOE has realized that to be comparable to the developed countries around the globe, empowering Saudi women and their participation in different sectors in the Saudi labor market is one of the initial steps since most jobs, specifically in higher education, are full of non-Saudi male teachers although there are more qualified Saudi female teachers than them (Al-Rasheed, 2004; Al-Khatib, 2004; Quraan, 2006). The question comes here: how can Saudi females teach English as a Second Language (ESL) to male students under the constrictions of customs and traditions?

In other words, the feelings of students about their teachers are one of the crucial things that have a profound effect on learning ESL, especially in Saudi Arabia, where males and females are used to being separated everywhere, such as in education and public works. Hence, a man is not familiar with dealing with a strange woman or looking at her. In some Saudi tribes, a man feels shameful to say the name of his mother or his wife while gathering with his male friends. Accordingly, teaching male students of the opposite gender to whom they have not been exposed to prepared before, might have an impact on their feelings which may deter them from learning ESL successfully (see Figure one).

Figure 1. Learning the L2 under the influence of external factors

Many researchers argue that learning languages represent a complex and challenging process of mastering language skills and systems. Undeniably, the emotions of students toward their teacher may occupy a substantial role in delivering success or not to language teaching environments (Metruk, 2021). In Saudi Arabia, most students are from conservative families that show strongly adhere to traditional customs and social values, such as a woman is not allowed to talk to a strange man in some tribes. Hence, these ideologies affect how male students feel and react towards female teachers as they were never prepared to be taught by females, as pointed out above. Therefore, the perceptions of male students of female teachers may have implications on
language learning and teaching in the Saudi context. It may be suggested that since the fact that the extent to which male students accept learning from female teachers and the interaction between female teachers and male students in ESL classrooms affect the outcome of learning ESL, conducting further studies in this area may shed more light on this matter and provide educators and researchers with a border picture in terms of effective teaching in Saudi Arabia.

This study attempts to investigate the perceptions of male students of being taught by female ESL teachers, and examine the barriers that female ESL instructors face in teaching male students within the framework of Saudi customs and traditions. Understanding the Saudi customs and traditions, which have an impact on the emotions of the learners, are critical as regards the process of learning and teaching a second language. Therefore, studying Saudi traditions to create a suitable learning environment for students and teachers is underrepresented in second language research. There is an explicit research gap between female teachers and male students in terms of teaching them under the shadow of traditions that may hinder the delivery of information to students in a very comfortable environment. This research is a valuable source of information for both SLA and linguistic theories. It could raise the awareness of ESL teachers for the best methods of teaching within the frame of Saudi customs and traditions. It could determine some challenges that female ESL instructors face in teaching male students and provide some strategies to help them easily interact with male students inside and outside the classroom.

The main research questions in this study are: 1-What are the male students’ perceptions of being taught by female ESL teachers in Saudi Arabia? Do their perceptions affect their process of learning positively or negatively? 2-What challenges do female ESL instructors face in teaching male students within the framework of Saudi customs and traditions? And how to tackle these problems?

In light of the vision 2030 pointed out above, it is now necessary to examine the differences between traditional customs and Islamic principles that appear helpful and applicable to the present exploration. The following section will define customs and traditions and compare them with Islamic principles followed by the emotional side of students (such as embarrassment and motivation) since culture plays a role in this side, which in turn may affect learning a second language.

**Literature Review**

**Cultures in Saudi vs. Islamic Principles**

Culture refers to common attitudes, beliefs, values, and habits that enliven life with these common meanings and frameworks for a particular human group. Farrukh (2019) defined culture as a collection of similar concepts, values, behaviors, beliefs, customs, and traditions that relate to a particular group of people. In essence, Hofstede (1980) defined culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another.” (p. 21-23)

Previously in Saudi Arabia (SA), females and males were separated everywhere, in schools, universities, and the public sector. In addition, some tribes up to now, look at women with an inferior eye that they cannot participate in most public decision-making, cannot talk with strangers and must obey their fathers and husbands. Also, a strange man cannot look directly into a woman's eyes even if he wants to talk to her about important things. Many researchers argued that citizens in Saudi Arabia must stop all these habits, which cause many problems, such as some men do not accept any idea from women because they are females. Al-Ghamdi (2015) asserted
that we must ban these customs that God has not sent down from a ruler, where, unfortunately, in some of our societies, it is still disgraceful to mention the name of a woman in a male community. It is shameful to register her name on the mobile phone for fear of anyone seeing her expression. Al-Ghamdi (2015) claimed this is not from Islam, as everyone knows the terms of the wives of the prophet Mohammed. The prophet also mentioned that women are the sisters of men.¹

Contrary to the prevailing traditional customs, the societal role of women in Islamic history does not contradict Islamic principles (Usmani, 2006; Abdul-Rahman, 2007). At the beginning of Islamic history in Medina, women were active participants in times of peace and war. Women came to the prophet Mohammed, peace, and blessings be upon him, and asked questions related to jurisprudence rules from behind a veil. Aisha, may God be pleased with her, the consort of the prophet, used to learn from him. There is no doubt; in these times, men have fulfilled the duty of knowledge and have become a reference for both men and women. Yet, if there is a woman who has a share of knowledge and the ability to teach, it is permissible to refer to her and ask her, but from behind a veil, as Aisha, may God be pleased with her, used to do.

Aisha, may God be pleased with her, was confined to her room so that men would come to her, and between her and them, a veil, i.e., a covering barrier. Then, they would speak to her, and she would talk to them. She also would benefit them with the knowledge she had (Bukhari, 1956). Women used to be teachers for both males and females in these times. It is essential to mention here that the Islamic religion allows interactions between men and women, but with legal regulations that preserve the honor and purity of women. Some of these regulations are (Abdul-Rahman, 2007):

First, a woman must not be alone with a foreign man. Al Saggaf (2012) stated that “the prophet, may prayers and peace of God be upon him, said: A man should not be alone with a woman unless she is accompanied by a Mahram.” (p.134)

Second, a woman should not touch a foreign man.³ Al-Tabrani (1992) mentioned that “The Messenger of God said: For one of you to be stabbed in the head with an iron needle is better for him than to touch a woman who is not permissible for him.” (p.171)

Third, a woman should limit her speech with strange men to only crucial things and avoid being too soft in her speech. God Almighty has commanded acceptable etiquette for the women of the prophet, may prayers and peace of God be upon him, and the women of the nation follow them in that; God Almighty said: {O wives of the prophet, you are not like any other women if you observe taqwā (righteousness). So, do not be too soft in your speech, lest someone having a disease in his heart should develop fancies (about you); and do speak with appropriate words.}⁴

Finally, a woman should wear a legal covering (Hijab which covers her head and body, often specifically refers to a cloth wrapped around the head and neck, covering the hair and face or leaving the face visible). God Almighty said: {O Prophet! Ask your wives, daughters, and believing women to draw their cloaks over their bodies. In this way, it is more likely that they will be recognized `as virtuous’ and not be harassed.}⁵

It is crucial to mention here students’ behavior in ESL classrooms is invariably influenced by their social milieu (Nikitina, 2007). Hence, female ESL teachers can be accepted in the students’ eyes by following Islamic principles, such as wearing legal clothes, directly talking to the point of the lesson, and avoiding being too soft in their speech or touching male students. In light of these critical differences between Saudi cultures and Islamic principles, it is now necessary to further examine the emotional sides of L2 learners that are affected by these constraints.
The Affective Domain of L2 Learners:
Learning a second language is deeply related to the affective domain of Human Psychology. Attitude, motivation, anxiety, embarrassment, and self-esteem are the most critically essential constituents of the affective domain, and they are a base for responding negatively or positively toward learning developments (Koka et al., 2019). Attitude includes how students feel about teachers, learning materials, classmates, and classrooms. A positive attitude has a substantial impact on learning a second language. Motivation refers to the desire of learners to strive for specific goals while learning a second language (Koka et al., 2019). Another vital constituent that interferes with learning a second language is language anxiety, which refers to nervousness, unease, worry, and apprehension while using a second language (LeDoux, 1996). This influential factor has a devastating impact on the performance of students in English skills, i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Embarrassment and Self-esteem are two more effective factors that affect L2 learning. Brown (1994) mentioned that learners with high levels of embarrassment often choose not to participate in group work. Embarrassment has a negative impact on the performance of students while learning. Self-esteem refers to the level of respect and self-confidence an individual has. This critical variable has a potential role in the learning process, either positively or negatively (Koka, 2019).

The process of learning languages relies on a series of constituents such as cognitive factors (learning strategies, language competence), and affective factors (attitude, anxiety, and motivation). Brown (1994) argued that the emotional sides (the affective domains) of human behavior involve feeling both about oneself and others with whom one comes into contact. This is the focus of our study; the attitude of male students toward the female ESL teachers. Many research in the late 1970s and early 1980s has been conducted to understand the emotional side of learners as it impacts the learning process. It was in the early 1980s when Krashen (1982) attested to the necessity of building a good relationship between the teacher and students to facilitate the learning process. Hence, negative feelings (such as the feeling of students of non-acceptance of the opposite gender) might interfere with the learning process. Teaching male students by ESL female teachers in Saudi Arabia may cause negative feelings such as anxiety, embarrassment, and lack of motivation.

Price (1988) examined Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) concerning some students’ variables such as age, sex, and public speaking anxiety. The results of his study show that FLA negatively influenced learning. Similarly, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991c) and Aida (1994) argued that the L2 learners with a higher degree of stress crucially scored lower grades than those of the lower anxiety learners. Young (1991) also determined six important causes of negative feelings in ESL classrooms: 1- learner beliefs, 2- personal and interpersonal anxieties, 3-instructor beliefs about language teaching, 4- language testing, 5-instructor-learner interactions, and 6- classroom procedures. Other researchers, such as Daly & Buss (1984) and Daly (1991), on the other hand, identified different characteristics of anxiety-provoking situations. They mentioned students are more comfortable in ordinary conditions. On their exposure to unfamiliar/new needs and problems, they start feeling discomfort. It is crucial to note here, male students are accustomed from an early age to being guided by male teachers in Saudi Arabia, so they might feel the discomfort being taught by female ESL teachers.

Several studies pointed out the significant role of the teachers according to their gender to support the affective domain of L2 learners, which enhances learning. Kissa (2006) and Xiong (2010) explained that gender differences in teaching could cause differences in students’
motivation to learn ESL. The findings of their study showed that female teachers motivate learners to understand better than male teachers. Another study was conducted by Rashidi and Sahar (2012) on the effect of gender on the patterns of classroom interactions between students and teachers in Iranian EFL classrooms. The findings showed that female teachers were more patient, supportive, and interactive with their students than male teachers. They give compliments, ask more referential questions, and use fewer directive forms. Rashidi and Rafiee (2010) presented further support for this line of argumentation in their investigation of the impact of gender in teaching. They pointed out female teachers are more supportive than male teachers because they give more positive feedback to the students than male teachers. Unlike female teachers who perform better in language and arts (Lim & Meer, 2017), Ibe (2013) stated male teachers are better in practical subjects, especially with courses that require dealing with laboratory equipment. Moreover, unlike female teachers who like detailed information and have strict personalities, male teachers give vital information without going into depth and have a good sense of humor that is necessary for male students (Park & Lee, 2006).

Other studies mentioned that there are no gender differences in teaching to manage students’ emotions. These studies suggested some strategies for ESL teachers, regardless of their gender, to raise the confidence and motivation of students and reduce stress and embarrassment in ESL classrooms. According to Sotto (2011), an effective ESL teacher encourages students to be more thoughtful, creative, and confident. A good teacher also maintains communicative interactions by exposing students to many activities, such as assignments, cooperative storytelling, role-playing, problem-solving, etc., which support their development (Foss & Reitzel, 1988; Lucas, 1984). Similarly, Bell (2005) argued that good ESL teachers usually employ communicative methods, use small groups for discussions, and employ new and changeable techniques within their teaching so students interact with their teacher and their peers. In a similar vein, Al-Maqtri and Thabet (2013) noted that ESL teachers should have a good mastery of L2 (including body language and a positive tone) to motivate students to learn. Philips also (1991) observed that ESL teachers could have a potential role in building a friendly atmosphere by exchanging ideas with learners, showing respect and appreciation, avoiding being a judge in a classroom, and treating the occurrence of errors as normal and expected phenomena (see also Campbell & Ortiz, 1991; Crookal & Oxford, 1991). Banzhaf (2018) further added that subject matter knowledge is the most important of teacher characteristics. Similarly, Hargreaves (2000) and Trigwell (2012) asserted the importance of positive feelings of the teachers in classrooms as there is a strong link between the teacher’s positive feelings and students’ success. Hence, ESL teachers should be positive in classrooms since their emotions significantly contribute to the quality of teaching the L2 (Brackett et al., 2013; Frenzel, 2014). Beauvois (1999) also pointed out another factor in ESL classrooms, i.e., the importance of using technology in ESL classrooms, such as using different educational platforms, to motivate students and make learning less stressful. She noticed that with the help of computer-aided instructions, the students are likely to interact fearlessly with their teacher and each other in their second language. It seems that male students in the Saudi context accept female ESL teachers by following Islamic principles and using effective teaching methods.
Method

The Case in Saudi Arabia and Sample of the Study
Female teachers now teach male students in public schools and universities across Saudi Arabia. The researcher collected her data from Yanbu Industrial College in Saudi Arabia in 2022. The sample included ninety male students aged between 18 to 20 years old. Most came to Yanbu Industrial College (YIC) from different regions in Saudi Arabia (cities and villages). Most of them were from conservative families, and most of them were taught by female teachers for the first time.

The researcher also interviewed six male students from YIC and six ESL teachers from different colleges in Saudi Arabia that allow female teachers to teach male students.

Research Instruments and Procedures
The study followed a qualitative paradigm as the main focus of this study was; exploring learners’ perception of being taught by female ESL teachers in Saudi Arabia. However, the researcher used quantitative and qualitative methods in collecting and analyzing data. The first part of the study presents the quantitative phase, which consists of a questionnaire of different items; an open-ended question, closed-ended question, and scaled-question in which most items were adapted from Horwitz & Cope (1986). English Skills Test (EST) was also used in the quantitative phase, which focused on four English skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) and was designed by the YIC. The second part of the study presents the qualitative phase, which consists of ESL learners’ and teachers’ interviews. The semi-structured interviews ensure the validity of the results of second language learners from the quantitative stage, obtain a profound explanation of students’ feelings and attitudes towards their female ESL teachers and explore some challenges that female instructors face in teaching male students within the framework of Saudi customs. Thus, the study incorporates different data collection methods arguing for the triangulation of a variety of ways to answer the research questions from different perspectives and to obtain more valid research results (Gass & Mackey, 2000; Dörnyei, 2007). The study went over two phases. In the first stage, the researcher divided students into two groups; group one was taught English by male teachers, and group two was taught English by female teachers for the first time. All male and female instructors taught English in lecture halls at Yanbu Industrial College in Saudi Arabia. After three months of teaching, the researcher compared the results of the two groups to explore the students’ competence in English after they had been guided by female teachers in classrooms.

Additionally, in this phase, the researcher asked students, who were taught by female teachers, to fill out a questionnaire of different tasks. As referenced in the introduction of this study, one of the aims was to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of male students toward female ESL teachers.

After the first phase was completed, the second phase, which consisted of interviews with ESL teachers and learners, started. The researcher conducted the discussion at the Writing Centre at YIC during the lunch break of teachers and students. Each interview lasted for approximately twenty to twenty-five minutes.

The researcher marked the response of male ESL students in the questionnaire and then compared their results with the interviews to investigate their perceptions of being taught by female ESL teachers. Moreover, the researcher analyzed the data from the teachers’ interviews to
examine the challenges female ESL instructors face in teaching male students within the framework of Saudi traditions, and how to tackle these problems. All the responses of the teachers and students are illustrated in the following section.

**Results**

For accurate analysis, the study focuses on three categories:

The first category includes the questionnaire, which is supported by some excerpts from the answers of male ESL students, that covers three essential points:

a. The emotions of the students (which include their acceptance and feelings toward their female teacher) in ESL classrooms,

b. The interactions of the students with their female teachers, and

c. The ability of the students to understand the second language from their female teachers.

The second category includes the English skills exam (ESE). The researcher used this exam to compare learners’ knowledge of English after they were taught by males with their English competence after they were led by females.

The third category includes interviews with female ESL teachers. The researcher used this instrument to introduce the successes and challenges female ESL instructors face when teaching the opposite gender.

The first analysis presents the perceptions of students of female ESL teachers to answer the first part of the first research question: What are the male students’ perceptions of being guided by ESL female teachers in Saudi Arabia? The data in the questionnaire show that about 80% of male students agreed to be taught by female ESL teachers, whereas around 20% disagreed with being guided by them (see Figure two).

![Figure 2. The acceptance of students being taught by female ESL teachers](image)

Also, a closer look at the answers of students in Q2 (see Appendix A, and Figure three) shows that 50% of students preferred to be taught by a female ESL teacher for many reasons; they wrote female ESL teachers are good at giving chances to learners to express opinions, caring and understanding the weak points of students in learning ESL. In addition, female teachers advise to students when their test result is below average and always charge them with positive energy. This result is in line with the findings of Rashidi and Sahar (2012), which show that female teachers are more supportive, patient, positive, and interactive with their students than male teachers. Besides, this result supported the hypothesis of Krashen (1982), which indicates the importance of creating a positive relationship between the teacher and students to facilitate learning a second language.
Many male students also wrote they prefer to be taught by females than males because they use changeable and creative materials. This result is consistent with the previous findings mentioned above, which suggested that using different materials and methods in ESL classrooms strengthens students’ confidence and enhances their motivation. Metruk (2021) notes that male students possessed greater self-confidence than females. Hence, boosting their confidence by involving them in different activities would facilitate learning ESL successfully. However, 20% of students preferred to be taught by male teachers because they felt more comfortable with males than females. They also wrote male teachers always explain essential points of a lesson and do not go for more details as female teachers do. In addition, unlike strict females, male teachers have a sense of humor. These findings are similar to Park’s & Lee’s (2006) findings which suggest that a good sense of humor is crucial when teaching boys to attract their attention to a lesson. Interestingly, although most the students chose to be taught English by females and only 20% of students selected to be guided by males, 30% of students preferred to be led by any of them (males or females). The essential things they care about are which one of them is better and more generous in giving grades and which one of them can deliver the content of the lesson. This finding supported the results of Benzehaf (2018), which suggest that subject matter knowledge is the most important of teacher characteristics. Consequently, unlike previous traditions in SA that males and females should be separated everywhere, male students do not have a problem being taught by female teachers because the essential thing they care about is the efficiency of the ESL teacher in delivering information.

As far as the relationship between the gender of the teachers and the feelings of the students (motivation, confidence, embarrassment, and anxiety) is considered in this study, the data (see Figure four) show that about 60% of male students are highly motivated (see Appendix A, part B, Q6 & Q15), and feel confident by female ESL teachers (see Appendix A, part B, Q5 & Q7). On the other hand, 10% of students feel stressed (see Appendix A, part B, Q10 & Q11), and about 25% of students feel embarrassed to be taught by female ESL teachers (see Appendix A, Q9 & Q13). Some students wrote that although female ESL teachers are good at teaching, we feel ashamed to look directly into their eyes. One of the students also added that he feels nervous and uncomfortable when talking to a female teacher or when the teacher moves around the class and comes close to students. It is clear that Saudi customs have an impact on the feeling of ESL learners (Nikitina, 2007). However, they should be reminded about Islamic history, which they should follow. Women used to participate in war, treat sick people and ask the prophet, Mohammed about some topics related to their religion, as pointed out earlier (see p.3 of this study).
While the majority of ESL learners, about 80% of students, can easily interact with their female teacher inside the ESL classroom, only 20% feel comfortable communicating with their teacher outside the ESL classroom (see Figure five). All students selected that they prefer to contact their female ESL teachers through social media since they feel uncomfortable going alone in her office. Some students wrote they feel more comfortable when their female teacher respects the social distance between her and them to avoid accidental touching inside the ESL classroom. It is essential to discussed here that Islam allows interactions between men and women, but with legal regulations as mentioned earlier (see p. 5 of this study), such as there is no objection to talking to her with a group of students while avoiding being alone with her.6

The second analysis presents the relation between the teachers’ gender and students’ competence in learning the L2 to answer the second part of the first research question (do students’ perceptions affect the learning process positively or negatively?). The data in the questionnaire (see Appendix A, part B, Q1, Q2, and Q3; see Figure six) show about 70% of students understand easily from their female teachers. On the contrary, about 20% of students wrote that those female teachers give much information, so they sometimes feel lost and drowning in the sea of information, and hence they prefer male teachers for all reasons mentioned above (see also page14 of this study). About 7% of students felt normal about female ESL teachers and found no difference between male and female teachers (Sotto, 2011; Maqtri and Thabet, 2013). Surprisingly, the data of ESE (see Figure seven) show that the percentage of the passed students who were taught by female ESL teachers slightly increased than the students who were taught by male teachers. This finding is inconsistent with some results (Daly & Buss, 1984; Daly, 1991; Von WÖrde 1998), which show that the exposure to an unfamiliar situation, i.e., male students learn ESL from female teachers in classrooms for the first time in their life, may lead to negative impacts. While this is inconsistent
with some studies, it agrees with others; such as Hargreaves (1998), Bell (2005), Timms, Graham, & Cottrell (2007), and Sotto (2011), which suggest that there is no significant difference between the results of the students and the gender of their teachers, however, the most important thing is following the effective methods of teaching ESL. Consequently, teaching students of the opposite gender in the Saudi context does not adversely affect the learning process.

The researcher also did interviews with the students and used some questions from the questionnaire to increase the validity of the research. All the findings of the interviews supported the quantitative methods. Based on our interpretation of these findings, we argue that culture does not adversely affect learning a second language. However, female ESL teachers must use teaching methods that are suitable for males and respect the customs of students that agree with Islamic principles.

The researcher enriched the analysis mentioned above by including female ESL teachers’ interviews that ensure the validity of the research and answer the second research question: What are some challenges that female ESL instructors face in teaching male students within the framework of Saudi customs and traditions? And how to tackle these problems?

For an accurate analysis of the interviews of the teachers, some challenges that female ESL teachers face will be addressed, followed by some solutions that could help female ESL instructors teach male students under the backdrop of Saudi cultures and traditions. Some teachers mentioned there is no significant difference between teaching males and females. However, two interviewees pointed out:

“…unlike females, male students get bored quickly.”

This result explains why 80% of male students prefer to be taught by female ESL teachers; because they use different methods of teaching ESL that help students focus more as they get bored easily (see also Sotto, 2011; Metruk, 2021). This finding also explains the reason why 20% of male students prefer male ESL teachers, as they give basic information and ignore details.

Another teacher pointed out another difference between male and female students:

“…male students do not ask many questions related to ESL curriculum as female students do…they might feel shy from their female teachers or understand the lesson well.”

These findings above are supported by results noted earlier that 25% of students pointed out that they feel shy from their female ESL teacher and 70% of students mentioned that they do not face problems understanding the lesson from their female ESL teachers. Lastly, two teachers added:
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“…unlike female students, male students have a sense of humor…and love challenges. Hence, female ESL teachers need to make the lessons interactive by implementing telling stories and games or challenging games to create an interactive atmosphere with their students.”

The majority of female ESL teachers in the interviews agreed that most students feel confident and interested in their classes. However, a few of them feel shy and sometimes stressed due to Saudi culture, which has an impact on their feelings, especially when they interact with their female teacher inside and outside the ESL classroom; for example, two interviewees explained as follows:

“…some students avoid looking directly at our eyes, and feel uncomfortable when we come close to them inside the classroom.”

Another experienced ESL teacher expressed similar explanations:

“…male students never come to my office, but if they have questions, they prefer to communicate through different apps such as WhatsApp or Telegram.”

A female ESL teacher must use social networking sites to help students to communicate with her virtually when needed. Other ESL teachers offered some solutions to difficulties that face female ESL teachers when teaching male students:

“…according to our religion, we are not allowed to touch a strange man. More specifically, it is peculiar to give male students a five or a pat on their back to create a friendly environment. However, there are other ways we are using to build a strong relationship with students. For instance, using compliments, positive words, and body language regularly, such as raising the thumb and asking about the absent students through social networking sites.”

Another teacher added:

“…according to our religion, we need to avoid making soft speeches with strange men, so we cannot laugh loudly with male students, or we cannot always get off the lesson’s topic. But, at the same time, we want to create an enjoyable environment that motivates them to learn ESL. Hence, various, and motivational techniques that support the different types of learners (visual, tactile, aural, social, verbal and logical learners) help them feel comfortable and enthusiastic in ESL classrooms.”

Most teachers explained:

“…wearing Hijab and covering the face are not hindered. Using technology in an ESL classroom can support us with anything we need in learning, such as the pronunciation of English letters that are not the same in Arabic.”

In Saudi Arabia, teaching male students by female ESL teachers is not a barrier that hinder them from learning English as a second language. Male students do not have a problem being guided by female ESL teachers because the essential thing they are looking for is the efficiency of teaching. Therefore, we advocate the integration of female teacher in ESL classrooms as they are vital for
an education system and for gender equality. Shreds of evidence suggest that female English teachers are more patient, supportive, and positive with students than male teachers. However, female ESL teachers should understand the gender differences in learning ESL. For instance, they should avoid being so severe with students, reduce their talking and use vivid methods in teaching since boys are less focused, and get unmotivated and bored quickly. In addition, female ESL teachers should follow Saudi customs that are compatible with Islamic principles since these customs have some impact on the feelings and attitudes of male students towards the opposite gender, such as feeling embarrassed or stressed about communicating with females. Hence, female ESL teachers can be accepted in the eyes of male students by wearing Hijab, avoiding being too soft in their speech, or touching male students. Also, female ESL teachers should keep a social distance between them and students to let students feel comfortable inside the ESL classroom. Moreover, implementing technology to communicate with students helps to overcome the shyness caused by talking to the opposite gender, and leads to learning English successfully in SA.

Discussion
This section discusses the primary study findings and suggestions that benefit ESL teachers, followed by limitations and conclusions.

Both the literature review and the experimental study have demonstrated evidence that there is no considerable impact of culture on male students’ perceptions of being taught by the opposite gender. However, the efficiency of teaching ESL is the most notable from their perspectives.

According to the research Q1(What are the male students’ perceptions of being taught by ESL female teachers in Saudi Arabia? Do their perceptions affect their process of learning positively or negatively?) Although male students have not been exposed to being taught by female teachers since they were young, the data show most of them prefer to be taught by ESL female teachers.

Surprisingly, male students prefer be taught by female teachers for many reasons: Unlike male teachers, female teachers are positive, supportive, and active by exchanging ideas with students and using creative activities inside the ESL classrooms. These findings align with the results of Rashidi & Sahar (2012), which show that female teachers are more supportive, patient, positive, and interactive with their students than male teachers. However, some learners prefer to be taught by male teachers for many reasons: 1- They feel more comfortable with males. This is according to the influence of their culture on them. Unlike Islamic principles, they were raised in an environment where women were permanently separated from men, as pointed out before. 2- Unlike female ESL teachers who are strict, male ESL teachers have a sense of humor and deliver information without going into details. These findings are similar to the results of Siebert (2003), Diab (2000), and Park (2006), which indicate that, unlike girls, boys are less focused and get unmotivated and bored quickly. Thus, implementing a fun learning environment in ESL classrooms is highly considered necessary for teaching male students.

The data also show that most students inside ESL classrooms interact efficiently with their female teachers, feel confident, and are highly excited to be taught by females. Unlike inside ESL classrooms, most of them prefer to communicate with their female teacher through various social networking sites than to come to her office alone to answer their needed questions. In addition, few students feel shy and nervous about talking with the female ESL teacher inside the ESL classroom. It is essential to mention here that Saudi culture has an impact on ESL learners’ feelings
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and attitudes. Male students, outside ESL classrooms, prefer to communicate with their female teacher via social networking sites than to come to her office in private because Islam forbids a foreign man to be alone with a woman, as mentioned earlier. On the contrary, they should not feel embarrassed or stressed about communicating with her inside the ESL classroom, as the female teacher and male students are all together inside the ESL classroom, and Islamic principles allow that. Furthermore, they should remember the critical role of women in Islam, that they were active and knowledgeable. They also used to answer the questions of men from behind the veil, as noted above, so why would they be shy of her?

In the second part of Q1, the data of ESE show that there is an uptick in the percentage of the passed students who were led by female ESL teachers to the students who were taught by male ESL teachers. Additionally, the data on the survey show that about one-third of students prefer to be guided by males or females because the most important thing that they care about is which one of them is better at presenting the lesson in a way they are easily understood, or which one of them is more generous in giving grades. This finding is supported by others, such as Hargreaves (1998), Bell (2005), Timms, Graham & Cottrell (2007), and Sotto (2011), which suggest that there is no significant difference between the results of the students and the gender of teachers, but the effective teacher is what students needed (Brosh,1996; Benzezahaf, 2018). It seems justifiable to conclude that although teaching male students to females in Saudi Arabia has slightly an impact on their feelings, such as feeling shy or not accepting of the opposite gender, it does not negatively affect the learning process.

According to the research Q2 (What are some challenges that female ESL instructors face in teaching male students with the framework of Saudi customs and traditions? And, how to tackle these problems?), the qualitative data analysis presents some challenges that female ESL teachers face in teaching male students and offers several suggestions for how female ESL teachers can help male students acquire ESL successfully.

Male students get bored and disappointed quickly (Park & Lee, 2006), especially after exams when their test results are not good. So, it is imperative to keep regularly pushing and motivating in ESL classrooms through using positive words, various learning techniques, such as encouraging open discussion and creative thinking and implementing technology, such as using different educational platforms like Kahoot and Mentimeter.

Male students also love enjoying good humor and the spirit of challenge (Oxford, 1990). Female ESL teachers should avoid being so strict with them, reduce their talking and make the activities challenging and fun by using games and telling stories. Male students are still significantly influenced by their culture. Therefore, female ESL teachers should respect social values that agree with Islamic principles. According to the Islamic religion, a woman cannot touch a strange man or be alone with him. Hence, the social distance between male students and female teachers is required to let students feel comfortable inside the ESL classroom. Moreover, giving students complete freedom in the way to communicate with their female teachers outside the college, either face to face or via using social networking sites, such as Telegram or WhatsApp, helps to combat the shyness caused by talking to females.

Since shaking hands with a foreign woman is not allowed in Islam, female ESL teachers can build friendly relationships with male students outside and inside classrooms by asking about the absent students and using compliments, positive words, and body language regularly, such as raising the thumb without touching any students, as mentioned above. Chomsky (1982) argues the importance of a positive relationship between teachers and students to help students learn a foreign
language successfully. Accordingly, building a good relationship with students and respecting their social values help reduce the embarrassment or stress caused by the different gender.

The study has some minor drawbacks that could be improved in upcoming research. One of the limitations is that the sample of male students who took the test was only taken from one college in SA. In addition, integration quantitative and qualitative methods in this study is an accepted tool for investigating male students’ perceptions of female ESL teachers. Nevertheless, the research findings cannot be generalized from the qualitative methods alone due to the small number of students (six male students). One of the pros of combining a quantitative method (the questionnaire and the English Skills Test) and a qualitative approach (the interviews) was the output of confirmed and expected evidence. All the data observed in the questionnaire were verified in the discussions.

Conclusion
This study explored the opinions and feelings of Saudi male students of being taught by female ESL teachers as they have not been prepared to be guided by females in academic life. In addition, the study addressed the challenges that female ESL instructors face in teaching male students within the framework of Saudi traditions. Therefore, this paper is beneficial as it gives crucial information of students’ perception of being guided by the opposite gender for the first time in the Saudi context. Unlike their culture, male students do not have a problem dealing with female ESL teachers because the essential thing is the efficiency of the ESL teacher in delivering information. However, female ESL teachers should understand the gender differences in learning ESL and respect the culture of the students that are compatible with Islamic principles to interact with them successfully.

Footnotes
1 For more details about how the prophet Mohammed and his wives (peace be upon them) used to interact with the opposite gender, see Bukhari, Ahmad & ALI, M. (1956) and Al-Nawawi (2014).
2 Mahram: all direct ancestors, all direct descendants, siblings, grandparents, and other descendants of siblings (Abdul-Rahman et al., 2007).
3 For more details about Islamic principles, see Al-Tabrani (1992).
4 The Qur’an (Alahzab, Juz 22/ Ayat 42 – pp. 422). Translated by Alfred (1930) and Itani (2014), Al-Ahzab Verse 32 | 33:32 - Quran O
5 The Qur’an (Alahzab, Juz 22/Ayat 59 – pp. 426). Translated by Alfred (1930) and Itani (2014), Al-Ahzab Verse 59 | 33:59 - Quran O
6 For more details about Islamic history and principles, see (Usmani, 2006) and (Al-Bukhari et al.,1956).

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Appendices

Appendix A questionnaire

Part A:
1) Do you agree that female instructors teach male students in ESL classrooms?
2) Which gender would you like to be taught English? And why?
   Females
   Male
   Any
   Why: ________________________________?
3-Do you understand an English lesson from a female teacher?
4- Do you feel any psychological pressure (such as nervousness or embarrassment) when you are taught by female teachers? If yes, why?
5- Are you feel comfortable communicating with female teachers inside and outside the classroom? Why?
   Inside the ESL classroom ______________________________________________________
   Outside the ESL classroom ______________________________________________________

Part B
On a scale of 1 to 5, please, put a tick mark as you see fit. THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS, JUST THOSE THAT ARE RIGHT FOR YOU! 1 = Disagree, 2 = Strongly disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the curriculum</td>
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<tr>
<td>1-The pronunciation of letters and words is clear to me when I have been taught by female ESL teachers.</td>
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<td>2-I can easily understand the lesson from my female ESL teacher.</td>
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<td>3- My female ESL teacher is effective inside and outside the ESL class.</td>
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<td>Feelings and Interactions</td>
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<td>4- In an ESL class, I can freely express my thoughts in front of my female teacher.</td>
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<td>5- I feel confident and comfortable speaking in English in front of my female ESL teacher.</td>
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<td>6- My female ESL teacher always motivates me.</td>
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<td>7-I would probably feel more comfortable around male ESL teachers.</td>
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<td>8-All my classmates respect female ESL teachers.</td>
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<td>9- It embarrasses me to express my opinions in front of my female ESL teacher.</td>
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<td>10- I would NOT be nervous speaking English with my female ESL teacher.</td>
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<td>11-Even if I am well prepared for ESL class, I feel anxious to speak in front of female ESL teachers.</td>
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<td>12- If I do not understand any point of the lesson, I feel normal to go to my female ESL teacher’s office and ask her.</td>
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<td>13- I can comfortably look at the eyes of my female ESL teacher.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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14- I feel more comfortable contacting my female ESL teacher through social networking sites than going to her office.
15- I feel excited to attend an ESL class when a female instructor teaches me.
16- I can speak freely with my female ESL teacher.
17- I feel more nervous and tense when I am taught by a female ESL teacher than to be guided by a male teacher.

Appendix B

Qualitative Phase

Part 1

ESL students’ interview questions
1- How many female teachers have you taught so far?
2- Do you support the teaching of females? From your experience, do you recommend male students take ESL classes with female teachers?
3- Do you prefer to be taught English by female teachers, male teachers, or both? Why?
4- Do you understand an English lesson from a female teacher?
5- Do you feel any psychological pressure (such as nervousness or embarrassment) when you are taught by female teachers? If yes, why?
6- Is it easy to go to your female teacher’s office room and discuss anything related to the curriculum? Do you prefer to contact her through social networking sites (such as Telegram)? Can you explain, please?
7- Can you list some things that prevent you from talking or interacting with female teachers comfortably?
8- Do you feel excited and enjoyment when female ESL teachers teach you? Why?

Part 2

ESL teachers’ interview questions
Section 1: General Information
1- Could you please tell me some general information about your teaching experience? For example, what level do you teach? And, how long have you been teaching female and male students?
Section 2: Questions
1- What are some differences between teaching male and female students?
2- Do you notice the impact of Saudi customs and traditions on the students’ behaviour toward you? For example, how do they interact with you inside and outside the ESL classroom?
3- Do Saudi customs and traditions prevent you from dealing with students freely? In other words, what are some challenges that you face in teaching male students? And, how to tackle these problems?
4. Do you feel male students feel psychological pressure, such as nervousness, or embarrassment, when dealing with you?
5. Do you feel students are interested in and comfortable being taught by female teachers?
6. After teaching male students, do you recommend a female ESL teacher to teach male students? Give some advice to female ESL instructors when teaching male students.